



chapter 06

the rescued
and the
runaways

Stranger Things - Season 4 by Nekkotronik

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Summary: Grieving the loss of Jim Hopper, Joyce moves her family, including Eleven, to Fairfax, Indiana. Thank you everyone for reading!

1. Episode 01 - the move

Part 01

Jonathan turned his old Galaxie onto a long driveway just outside Fairfax, Indiana. The way was lined with tall, lush trees and thick undergrowth. The orange sunlight spilled through the trees and left jagged shadows on the gravel road. The sun was setting, they had been driving for most of the day. "Just like home," mused Will.

They rounded a curve in the driveway to reveal their new home. It was large, much larger than either of them had expected. It was also old, much older than either of them had expected. "This can't be right," said Jonathan skeptically. "There is no way we can afford a place this big."

"Maybe we can. Hey, it looks like there's lots of room for when my friends come to visit." Jonathan rolled his eyes at the thought of round-the-clock Dungeons & Dragons with Mike, Lucas and Dustin.

He brought the car into park in front of the house. It was painted pale blue what looked like more than a decade ago. The paint peeled from the wooden siding. The windows were small and numerous. It had a veranda that grandly circled the entirety of the main floor. Shingles were splitting and falling from the roof that boasted several chimneys. It was most likely a lovely house, when it was originally built, but time had not been kind to the dwelling.

Behind them, Joyce and El had been driving in near silence since the last rest stop. They were both tired and each had a heavy heart. Moving away from Hawkins was painful, but losing one person in particular was absolute heartbreak. For the last three months, neither one of them really talked about it. They kept their feelings to themselves; only wordless, lengthy hugs were exchanged.

Even after taking the pains to sell the house in Hawkins, pack up and move, Joyce was still having second thoughts. She had told herself a thousand times that moving away was what she had to do to keep her children safe. Hawkins would never be safe, even if the only dangers lingering there were the memories.

All four of them exited the vehicles and stood to survey the old house. "Great, isn't it? It looks just like Mrs. Smith described. Would you believe there are eight bedrooms? That's two rooms each!" She smiled and marched up the stairs to the veranda. The door was unlocked and Joyce and El entered. They found a note from Mrs. Smith together with keys to the front and back doors. "Welcome to your new home, Joyce and family!" Joyce read aloud. "Here are the keys. Please keep them safe as there are no copies at the moment. There is a lasagna for you in the fridge. Heat at 350 degrees for 45 minutes. I trust you had a pleasant trip. I will check in on you tomorrow. Tonight is my BINGO. All the best, Mrs. Smith."

Joyce didn't read the P.S. out loud to El. It read, "Your deposit check bounced, but I'm sure it was just a banking error. If you could write a new one for tomorrow, that would be appreciated."

Part 02

"Camp was not lame! Stop saying that, Lucas!" Dustin shrieked.

"Look, I'm just saying that a bunch of nerds, hanging out, throwing around their nerdy ideas at each other, doesn't sound like it was particularly cool."

"You wouldn't know cool if it smacked you upside the head!" Dustin fumed. "Just because Cerebro got trashed doesn't mean I have nothing to show for it. Camp wasn't just ideas, I have blueprints... and prototypes."

"Blah, blah, blah." Lucas mumbled, glancing at Mike in the corner of the basement. "Are you going to sulk forever, Mike?"

"I'm not sulking! I'm just worried about El," Mike replied sharply.

"Yeah, worried she's gonna dump your ass again," laughed Lucas.

"Hey, that's not fair," Dustin rushed to Mike's rescue. "You don't know what it's like to have your girlfriend live far away. Yours is right here in Hawkins."

"That's right, she does live here. So I'm gonna go to her house instead of hanging out here with you lame-wads." Lucas got up from the floor

and scooped up his backpack.

"You're leaving?" Mike gaped.

"Yeah, I am. If we're not going to start a campaign or go do target practice or something, then I don't need to hang out with you guys." He stomped up the stairs and out the door, leaving Mike and Dustin behind with their mouths open.

Lucas pedaled his bike across town towards Max's house. The crisp, October air helped cool his anger. Will and El had only been gone three days and already he felt like everything had fallen apart. Dustin was only interested in talking about his inventions and Mike had barely said two sentences. "I don't need them." Lucas repeated to himself as he deposited his bike on Max's front lawn.

He immediately heard voices from inside the house. Max's step-dad was shouting and he sounded furious. Lucas's stomach turned. He didn't know what to do.

Lucas stood on the grass, frozen. As he was trying to decide whether to ring the bell or get back on his bike and leave, the front door flew open and Max burst out. Her face was red and her eyes were swollen. Seeing Lucas, she let out a gasp of relief and threw herself into his arms. "Let's get out of here." She said steadily.

They got on their bikes and headed back towards town. Lucas hadn't said a word, he didn't know what to say. He liked Max, a lot, but he still had trouble dealing with, what seemed to him as, her rollercoaster of emotions. Between Mike and Max, he had almost had enough.

"Can we go to Mike's house?" she asked.

"No, I just came from there, it's no good."

"Oh. Can we go to your house then?"

"I guess." His mind wheeled, trying to think of an excuse not to go home, but no excuse was offered.

They pedaled on in silence and in the safety of Lucas's room, he asked

the question he knew he should ask, but didn't want to ask. "Do you want to talk about it?" He held his breath for her answer.

The floodgates opened. "It's my step-dad. Ever since Billy... He hasn't been the same. He was mean and strict before, but now he is just maniacal. He's after me for every little thing and he gets unreasonably angry at the tiniest things. He was screaming at me just now because I accidentally left my bike on the driveway behind his truck. He just lost it on me! I try to stand up for myself and yell back, but that just makes him angrier. And now... honestly, now I'm just afraid of him."

Lucas was stunned. He had never dealt with anything similar at home with his family. But his family had never lost a child, either. Words were not coming to him.

Tears started to shine in Max's eyes. She opened her mouth to speak again, but instead, leaned into his chest and wrapped her arms around him. He returned the hug and they sat in silence.

Part 03

"Robyn! Get out here!" Steve called from the cash register. "It's Saturday night and I can't handle this crowd by myself."

Robyn was in the back office, sitting at the desk. Papers covered the small desk and she was carefully filling out forms in large, neat block letters. "Coming!" she called back, but remained in her chair.

The next thing Robyn knew, Steve was standing in the doorway of the office, his hair filling the frame. "Robyn, get the lead out! They're not paying you to fill out college applications. I need help."

"Sorry, coming," she mumbled, slightly enjoying the fact he was annoyed.

They worked side by side for the rest of the evening without much chance for conversation. It was a typical Saturday evening, which meant it was steadily busy until closing time at 11 o'clock. At about fifteen minutes to closing, things started to slow down and there were only a few customers left in the store. "So what are you doing

tomorrow?" Robyn asked.

"Dunno, gonna sleep in for sure. Dustin asked me over to his house for a bit, but I dunno..." he trailed off.

"Oh, well I was going to ask you if you wanted to come over for Sunday dinner."

"Robyn, I keep getting the feeling that you're using me as a smoke screen with your parents."

Just then, a young man approached them and, interrupting them without hesitation, quietly slurred, "Oh hey, hi guys. How are you doing this fine night? Umm... so... do you have, like, Back to the Future?"

"Sorry, man," Steve answered. "That's still in theatres, not on VHS."

"Oh right. Ha ha. Well... umm... or is it?" he countered finally, pulling something from his jacket.

"Hey, what is that?" Robyn asked, concerned.

He produced a home video VHS with hand writing on the label. "So, like, I figured since you guys work in a video store that you, like, umm... really like movies, you know? So, like, I made a copy of Back to the Future, ha ha, and I'll sell it to you for... twenty bucks."

"I frigging love that movie!" Steve exclaimed.

"And, I was also thinking, like, if either of you have any special, you know, customers... you can maybe rent it to them and put the money, you know, right in your own, like, pocket. Ha ha! You can't lose."

"Sweet! I'm in!" Steve grinned and reached for his wallet. The man grinned back and extended the VHS tape toward Steve.

"Are you out of your mind?" Robyn asked. "Do you know how quickly you would get fired if our boss found out you were renting bootleg videos out of his store? And even if you got away with it, what incentive does anyone have to return it to you? It's not like you could go after them or anything. Don't be stupid!"

"But I really like the movie! What if I don't want to wait for it to come out on VHS? Maybe I want it for my own personal enjoyment."

"Yeah! The man has a point, lady," the bootlegger stated.

"At least haggle with him," Robyn suggested, defeated.

"Oh, right!" Steve closed his wallet and turned to the bootlegger. "I'll give you ten."

"Deal!" the man said, looking over his shoulder out the front window.

Steve extended a ten-dollar bill toward him and took the video tape. Without another word, the bootlegger exited the front door and ran from the front of the store. "Awesome!" Steve beamed, examining the video tape.

"Sometimes, I just can't believe you." Robyn said, shaking her blonde hair. "Well, this I have to see. How about I come to your place tomorrow and we'll watch that."

"But I want to watch it tonight!" he moaned.

"You are the most impulsive person I have ever met. Can't you wait for anything or think anything through?"

"What's the problem? It's just a movie. Nothing bad happened."

"No, nothing bad has ever happened because you were impulsive and acted without really thinking. Nothing at all," she said, emphasizing her sarcasm.

Part 04

It was Nancy Wheeler's first day as the new receptionist at Hawkins Police Station. Florence was showing her the ropes. It was a lot different than the newspaper. There was a weight in the air and everyone worked quietly for the most part. It smelled different too, like coffee and sweat. The newspaper had smelled like chemicals and cigars. Nancy listened carefully as Florence explained the telephone switchboard to her. It had four lines that could each be put on hold, transferred or relegated to an answering machine. The answering

machine was a finicky piece of electronics that needed to be turned on and off each day for office hours.

Florence spoke casually and Nancy could tell she was tired. Everyone there looked tired, like sleep was something of a rare commodity. She scratched some notes into her coil scribbler and took in what Florence found important enough to tell her. "My last day is Friday, so you have until then to ask me any questions. I suppose after that you could call me at home if you really got into trouble. The most important thing is to not allow yourself to get rattled," she explained, suddenly sounding very serious. "A cool head is the best weapon against crime."

Officers Callahan and Powell entered the station, removing their hats. "Hi Nancy, first day finally? How is Florence treating you?" Powell asked.

"Yeah, the background check took longer than I had hoped, but I'm here now. Florence is amazing, I have big shoes to fill," she smiled.

"I'm only a size 7," Florence quipped, butting her cigarette.

"Me too," Nancy added, hoping to find common ground with her mentor, no matter how weak it sounded.

"When the time comes, lunch is on us today, ladies." Callahan announced.

"I have to retire to get a free lunch out of you guys?" Florence teased, her eyes dancing. Callahan waved meekly at the two women with a shy smile and retreated to his office.

Part 05

At the same time, miles and miles away, Jonathan was at a job interview. The Fairfax newspaper was hiring a staff photographer. He sat across a large, extremely messy desk from the editor, a Mr. Skinner. Skinner was reviewing Jonathan's portfolio. Jonathan was slightly embarrassed at the appearance of it. It was a second-hand folder that had a few cracks, scratches, and one missing corner. But he felt confident that the content would speak for itself. He had done

a lot of work he was proud of at the Hawkins newspaper. He left in several artistic shots to show the range of his abilities.

He watched Skinner peruse the photographs, when suddenly a photo came loose from the folder and glided to the floor. Skinner bent to pick it up and Jonathan's heart skipped a beat. Immediately his palms began to sweat. He knew that photograph well, he just had no idea why it was tucked into his portfolio.

"What's this?" Skinner asked, looking puzzled.

"Just a dark room experiment. It's nothing, it shouldn't be in there." Jonathan leaned across the desk to gingerly retrieve it from Skinner's curious gaze.

"That's one hell of an experiment, if you ask me. That looked downright terrifying. Well, young man, you certainly have a lot of talent. I'll start you off with a probationary period, and if you're reliable and you keep turning in photos like these here, you will have a great future ahead of you at this paper."

"Thank you, Mr. Skinner," Jonathan said as calmly as he could. The appearance of the photograph had startled him and he was trying desperately to regroup. The interview wasn't over, the job wasn't in the bag yet.

"I'll ask you to start tomorrow. You can get acquainted with the rest of the staff and you can have a look at our dark room. The other photographer, Jed, will be in to show you the ropes. He works special occasions only, so you both will be working on Halloween events."

"Thank you again, Mr. Skinner. I'm really looking forward to... getting started." Jonathan stood when Mr. Skinner did, shook his hand and gathered his portfolio in his arms.

Part 06

El finished arranging the last of her clothes in the dresser drawers. Her room was plain, but it was on the second floor and had a beautiful, broad view of the hills and trees beyond.

She resented Joyce for moving them to Fairfax. She was angry that

no one in Hawkins, particularly the Wheelers, hadn't offered to look after her so she could stay. She felt she could have stayed there on her own. After all, she had lived on her own for ages without anyone's help. But things weren't the same. Hopper was gone and so were her psychokinetic abilities. As a coping mechanism to help not be angry with everyone, she repeatedly told herself that she was just an ordinary girl, and she had to do what ordinary girls did.

An ordinary girl, with brothers, she thought to herself as Will appeared at the door. "How's it going?" he asked. "This room is nice."

"Yeah," she replied, still not sure to make of her new living arrangements. "Will, I am scared to start school tomorrow. We don't know anyone. Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Max are all back home and they'll be going to school without us."

"But we have each other." he smiled. "And no one can make us feel like we don't belong if we have each other."

"Kids, time for dinner!" Joyce bellowed.

El stood up and instantly started to sway on her feet. Will watched in shock as her eyes rolled into the back of her head and all her strength abandoned her muscles. Her head bobbed and fell back. He dove to catch her, but she landed in a heap on the hardwood floor. Will fell at her side and started shaking her. "El! El!"

Footsteps hammered up the stairs and Jonathan and Joyce tumbled into the room. "What happened?" Joyce gasped, "How?"

Jonathan carefully pulled El's shoulders so she laid flat on the floor. Her eyes were closed, but she was still breathing. "I don't know," answered Will, still shocked. "She just got up to go to dinner and she fell right over."

"El?" Jonathan whispered.

The three of them watched her and waited. Blood started to trickle from her nose. Will's eyes widened with fear.

A few heartbeats later, El's eyes fluttered open and she slowly tried to sit up. "Are you okay? What happened?" Joyce asked again.

El looked at the three of them, her eyes out of focus. She blinked and breathed, then put her hand to her nose and felt the familiar blood there. She quickly sharpened up and was easily able to speak. "I don't know. The room just went dark and the next thing I know, you're all here," she sounded genuinely confused.

"Did you hit your head?" Joyce asked in a motherly tone.

"I don't think so," El put her bloody hand to her head. "I think I'm fine. Can we go eat?"

"I think you just passed out. That happens sometimes when..." Joyce trailed off.

"I'm fine," El assured. "Please, let's just go eat."

Part 07

The four teenagers sat where they used to play Dungeons and Dragons, only this time, the table was covered with crudely drawn spec sheets. Max held her math textbook in her lap and was trying to finish a worksheet for school. She was barely listening to Dustin's lecture about his invention.

"Since, you know, the fourth of July, I've been thinking about creating a weapon to defeat the Mind Flayer. Basically, the only thing we know about it is that it doesn't like heat. We tried the fireworks, but they all just bounced off of it and were hardly effective. The obvious solution was a flame thrower, but that puts everyone at risk. I've been trying to create something that would wound the flayer, but not us. Or, in any event, have a farther range than a flame thrower so we would not have to be in close proximity to attack."

"So what did you come up with?" Lucas asked lazily.

"Exothermic chemical reaction!" Dustin announced.

"Say that again," Lucas drawled, still disinterested.

"A chemical reaction with a by-product of blistering heat!" he looked at everyone's faces to find an indication of their understanding and saw none. "The opposite of an exothermic reaction?" their faces

registered nothing.

"Anyway, if there are two canisters of the required chemicals, we can use a pump and a trigger to combine them, only when needed, and spray the Mind Flayer with a heat-producing chemical reaction."

"Like a mega hot water gun?" Mike suggested.

"Yes! Only it will be cool to us because the chemicals will not be combined until they leave the nozzle and spray, hopefully over 15 yards, onto the Mind Flayer, demogorgon, or demodog, as the case may be."

They all shuddered at the thought of all three of the terrors from the Upside Down attacking at once.

Dustin immediately attempted to relieve the tension in the room. "And this," he pulled a large sheet from the bottom of the pile, "is the finished weapon! I've been working on it for the past three months."

The giant sheet of paper floated to a rest on top of the table to reveal a hand drawn image. The device looked like something a gardener would carry on his back to spray weeds. Like Dustin had said, it showed two canisters, side by side, a pump at the top and a hose with a triggered spray gun nozzle, all attached to thick backpack straps.

"Hey, it kinda looks like a proton pack." Lucas observed. "If we all had one of these, and if it actually worked, I don't think I'd ever feel afraid of the Mind Flayer again."

"A proton pack?" Max finally looked up from her math book and scrutinized the drawing. "So what? You guys are going to run around like little Ghostbusters, only with Mind Flayers instead of ghosts?" she laughed.

"THE GORGONBUSTERS!" Dustin screamed and began hopping around the room in his excitement. "Max, you are a genius! That is a terrific idea! We build four of these babies and no one would ever need to be scared again. We could protect the whole town!"

"Then El and Will could come home!" Mike chimed in. "I'm with you, Dustin! I want to be a Gorgonbuster!"

"Well, there were four Ghostbusters, so we're gonna need two more." Dustin looked pointedly at Lucas and Max, still sitting at the gaming table. Lucas rolled his eyes.

"Sure, I'm game." Max said. "You guys still need a Zoomer. Only I don't have a hearse, but I'll have my learner's permit soon." She turned to look at Lucas and waited for his answer.

He stared at her in disbelief. "But..." he started. He knew what he had to do and, again, he didn't want to do it. "Fine, I'll be a Gorgonbuster too, but no Winston Zedmore jokes or I'm out!" he threatened.

"Well, you were the last to join!" Dustin teased playfully. Lucas immediately jabbed him in the arm with his fist.

"This is so great, you guys!" Dustin chortled. "I'll get to work on the prototype right away. This is going to be so awesome!" he could hardly contain himself.

Just then, the phone rang, one ring and then a pause. "Lucas, that was your mom, you have to go home." Mrs. Wheeler called from upstairs.

"Alright, you losers, I'll see you at school tomorrow." He leaned into Max and gave her a kiss, she smiled up at him, then ran up the stairs and out the door as the phone rang again.

"Mike, phone's for you." Mrs. Wheeler called again.

Mike scowled and picked up the receiver of the downstairs phone. "Hello?"

"Hi Mike, it's me," El said quietly over the line. Mike heard the upstairs phone click as his mother hung up.

"El! It's you! You finally got the phone hooked up over there. How are things?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Oh, things are good." El answered reluctantly.

"Is something wrong?" Mike was instantly worried. He had honestly

expected a much warmer greeting from El on their first phone call since she moved away with the Byers.

"No," she paused. "Well, yes."

"What is it?" Mike's anxiety was building making him slightly terse.

"Well, something did happen. Umm... I passed out the other day. I'm fine, but it was, well, weird."

"Are you okay? How come you passed out? Are you sick?" Mike's questions came rapidly.

"No, I'm not sick, but, Mike, don't say anything to anyone, but..."

"But what? El, tell me! I'm going crazy!" Dustin and Max looked over at him as he raised his voice. He met their stares and rounded the corner, stretching the phone cord as far as it would go to give himself a little privacy.

"Just promise you won't tell anyone." she pleaded.

"Of course I promise, I'll do anything you ask me to."

"Well, you know that place I go? When I want to find someone?"

"Yeah. But what does that have to do with you passing out? I don't understand. "

"Mike, it was like... it was like... rather than me going there on purpose, when I passed out, it felt like someone was pulling me there," she paused, "I had to fight to get back. I was so scared."

"Who? How?" Mike's mouth hung open.

"I don't know," was her only response.

"It has only happened the once?" was all he could think of to ask.

"Yes. Please don't tell anyone. I don't want a questions because I don't have any answers. I'm afraid of what they'll do. You know, considering what we've all been through."

Mike considered her request. "You're totally right. There aren't too many people we can trust anymore."

"I have to go, the charges."

"Wait! What's your number?"

Mike could hear the smile in her voice as she read out the new telephone number, "It's 555-1105. Joyce asked the phone company for an eleven."

Mike jotted the number down on the drywall. "Cool." he answered. "I'll call you next time, I just have to get permission."

"Bye, Mike. I miss you."

"I miss you too. I'll tell the guys you miss them. And tell Will we miss him."

"Thanks. I'll tell him. Bye." her voice was weak.

"Bye." Mike heaved a heavy sigh and hung up the telephone.

Dustin and Max stared at Mike. "What the hell was that?" she asked.

"That was El," he struggled. "Their new telephone is hooked up. And, so... yeah."

"You're weird."

Part 08

Will and El walked along the side of the road on their way to school. It was the day before Halloween and most of the houses had decorations up. Nothing extravagant or terrifying. Most of the decorations were simply pumpkins or jack-o-lanterns, homemade ghosts strung up in trees or cobwebs with plastic spiders. There were, of course, lots and lots of orange garbage bags overflowing with autumn leaves, jack-o-lantern faces grinning at the street.

Will was excitedly telling El all about the Dungeons & Dragons campaign he was creating for their friends' visit at Thanksgiving. He

said he had a clever twist in the story near the end of the quest. As he was explaining exactly how clever the twist was, without giving it away, El's pace slowed, and again he watched her muscles soften and give way to gravity. This time, he was able to dive under her at the last moment, keeping her from collapsing on the pavement at full force. Her weight crushed down on him, and he landed on his hip and scraped his leg in the process. He held on to her as best he could, but even in a sitting position, she was difficult to hold steady. Blood streamed from her nose and her body waivered to fall. All Will could do was lay her down gently, because he could not hold her up.

He stared into her face, waiting for her to wake up easily, like she had the first time. He waited. "El?" he whispered.

He waited longer, but she did not move. He put his ear to her mouth. She was breathing, but only slowly. He shook her shoulders, still nothing happened. He started to panic. He scanned the road in both directions, hoping to see an oncoming vehicle. Nothing.

"El!" he yelled and shook her again.

The blood trickled down the side of her face and Will decided he had to knock at one of the houses to get help. Just as he moved to leave, her eyes fluttered open. Her eyes opened wide, terrified. "El!" he sang, relief washing over him. "Are you alright? Speak to me."

She pulled herself onto her elbows, but did not look at him. He watched her, she was still disoriented, but at least she was awake. His hip throbbed.

Slowly, the panicked expression left her face and she turned to Will. "You caught me."

"I had to, you were going down like a load of bricks! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. Where are we?"

He looked at her, puzzled. "We're on our way to school," he advised, suddenly concerned that she had maybe had a seizure rather than just passing out.

"Right." she focused on the ground and pulled herself up. "Then we

better get going."

"Maybe we should go back home. You're not well."

"I'll be fine, it was nothing." She pushed forward, determined.

Rather than argue with her, he kept pace with her all the way to school. He knew he had to tell his mom about it when they got home that evening. This definitely meant a trip to the doctor for El. His concern for her colored his mood for the rest of the day.

Part 09

Joyce had just started her evening shift at the supermarket, The Big Apple. She was given the evening shift because she was new. She would probably had to work for years to earn the seniority to work the day shift.

Things had been going well over the previous few weeks, the job was pleasant and the people were friendly. She was kept busy as the brand-new mega market was doing well in the growing town. She worked alongside several bag boys, teenagers who usually had nothing to say. They were the type to slouch and stare at the floor with their bottom lips hanging out. "Mouth-breathers," Joyce would say to herself and smile, remembering what Will and his friends called these seemingly brain-dead creatures.

She had just finished ringing through a customer's order when the loudspeaker crackled, "Joyce Byers to the Manager's office. Joyce Byers."

Joyce felt a surge of nervousness, like electricity, course through her stomach. *Have I done something wrong?* she asked herself. She locked her till and headed toward the back of the store, thinking of all the tiny mistakes she had made and wondered if any of them warranted dismissal.

She entered the office to see Wayne, the manager, standing with the phone in his hand. "Your daughter's school. There's an emergency." She hesitated at the word daughter, as no one had referred to El in that manner before. Wayne held out the phone with a tight

expression on his face.

"Hello?" Joyce said into the receiver.

"Mrs. Byers? This is Mrs. Spencer, the vice principal. I'm calling to tell you that your daughter, Jane Hopper, has been taken to the hospital by ambulance. She lost consciousness during class and an ambulance was called when she could not be revived."

Joyce recalled the Sunday evening several weeks ago when El had passed out in her room. This was serious. "She is at the Fairfax hospital?" Joyce asked the vice-principal.

"Yes, your son, Will, accompanied her in the ambulance. They will both be there." Mrs. Spencer explained. "Mrs. Byers, I do hope she is alright. Please call the office when you can. There was no preceding incident to report, we just like to know our students are being looked after."

What was that supposed to mean? Joyce wondered. "I'm on my way there now, thank you Mrs... Uh... Sp..." she dropped the phone absently and met Wayne's eyes. He nodded and, with his approval, she fled from the supermarket, into her green Pinto, and directly to Fairfax Hospital.

At the hospital, Will was waiting. Joyce collected his small frame in her arms and held him close. "It's going to be alright. But I have to ask you, what happened? Were you there?"

"Yes, I was. But, mom, on the way to school this morning, it happened again. She was just walking, we were talking, and she just closed her eyes and fell over. I tried to catch her. She didn't wake up for a really long time. But when she did, she insisted on going to school anyway. So we did, and I was going to tell you everything tonight, but then this happened!" he finally took a deep breath and tried to steady himself.

"What happened at school just now? Did anything happen to her before she passed out?" Joyce asked calmly.

"We were just sitting in science class and she toppled over in her

chair. But, mom, this time she didn't wake up!" he was getting more upset by the moment.

"Will, I need you to calm down, honey. El is going to be fine. Let me talk to the doctors and find out how she is. Come on." she took his hand and approached the front desk.

"I'm here for Jane Hopper, I'm her... mother, Joyce Byers." she told the triage nurse.

The woman at the desk sorted through several forms until she found the right one. "Yes, Jane has been admitted under Dr. Svenson. He's with her now. Can you please wait in the seating area until he can meet with you?" her manner was sympathetic, yet professional.

Joyce had been through this type of scenario enough times to know that the best thing to do was take a seat in the waiting room. "Thank you. Please let us know as soon as the doctor is available."

"Of course," she smiled and carried on with her work.

"I hate hospitals," Will whispered.

"I know you do, honey. Let's wait for the doctor." Joyce said a silent prayer to no one in particular that El would be okay. She filled out paperwork while they waited and habitually stared at either the clock or the front desk, hoping to be called.

After about ninety minutes, Joyce was relieved to be summoned to the front desk by the triage nurse. Standing by the desk was, what could only be described as, the best-looking doctor Joyce had ever seen. He could have easily been the best-looking man Joyce had ever seen. "Is this guy for real?" she muttered as she and Will approached the desk.

"What, mom?" asked Will.

"Nothing," replied Joyce.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Svenson," he said showing perfectly white teeth and deep dimples. He extended his right hand and Joyce shook it briefly. Joyce was reluctant to meet his eyes.

"How is El, I mean Jane?" she asked, trying desperately to not itemize all the similarities between Dr. Svenson and Don Johnson.

"El must be a nickname? Come this way and I'll explain what we know." He led them down a side corridor, out of the flow of traffic. He looked extremely serious and Joyce started to fear the worst. She braced herself for his report.

"Jane was brought to us by ambulance in an unconscious state. She has not regained consciousness. We understand from the school that there was no corresponding incident to cause this unconsciousness. Does Jane have any health issues that you know of?"

Joyce's mind searched for answers, but she could think of nothing from El's past she wanted to share with this doctor. She looked helplessly at Will. "She passed out on the way to school this morning. And a few weeks ago at home."

"I see," said Dr. Svenson. "No head trauma or accidents?"

"No," replied Joyce. "At first, I thought it might have been because she was getting the flu, but it can't be that."

It was clear that Will did not want to divulge anything about El's past to this doctor either.

"We are going to have to keep her overnight. There are several tests we have to run to determine the cause. We won't be able to do much for her tonight except keep her comfortable and under observation. Mrs. Byers, I want to warn you that this is a potentially serious condition. I wish I could tell you something more comforting, but due to the fact that there was no corresponding accident or incident, the cause could be grave."

Joyce nodded and simultaneously felt like she didn't understand anything. "Can we please see her?"

"Of course, right this way." he strode down the wide, white hallway and Will and Joyce scurried behind him. At the end of the corridor, he pushed open a wide door and held it for them, deliberately making eye contact with Joyce, a kind, understanding expression on

his face. He did not enter the room with them, but simply nodded and retreated down the hallway.

The room was bright in the late afternoon sun. El laid in the bed with a heart rate monitor making the only noise. Her eyes were closed and she looked like she was merely asleep, except for the bandages at her nose. Joyce's heart sank when she saw her. What could possibly be wrong with her? she questioned silently.

Jonathan appeared at the doorway, and after a brief conversation with Joyce, beckoned Will to leave with him, to go home for the evening. "I'm going to stay here for a while. I'll be home later." Joyce hugged her boys and watched them leave. She pulled up a chair beside El's bed and took her hand.

The suppressed guilt of moving her family away from their friends broke free and washed over her. "I'm trying so hard to take care of you, but it seems like everything I do is wrong. I just don't feel like I'm winning even though I've done everything that makes sense to me. I just feel like I'm not good enough to take care of you. You're a remarkable young woman who has been through hell and come out the other side. And I'm just... well... me."

She sat in silence and grief took hold of her. She shook as she cried. She cried because she desperately missed Jim. He had taken care of El for years and she had blossomed. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, Joyce needed him too, to challenge her and give her courage. *Well, I can still have courage. No one has taken that away from me*, she thought. Feeling fortified from within, she took a deep breath and tried to relax. She wiped the tears from her face and blew her nose. An hour slipped by and eventually she nodded off in the chair next to El.

It was dark outside when Joyce opened her eyes. Her neck was sore and she was thirsty. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she noticed a young girl standing across from her at El's bedside. She wore a long nightgown and a vacant expression. She regarded El carefully, then slowly turned to meet Joyce's gaze. She stared at Joyce momentarily, unblinking, then turned again and slowly padded across the room and out the door.

Joyce watched the girl go, then stood, kissed El on the forehead and whispered, "I'll be back in the morning. Stay strong, El. You'll be home with us again soon." Then she also turned and tiptoed across the room and out the door.

2. Episode 02 - this place

Part.01

Plumbing and electrical parts littered Dustin's bedroom. Every available surface held some sort of fixture or apparatus waiting for its turn to be added to the "gorgon buster". "Did you try on your Ghostbusters uniform? Mine didn't fit," Dustin announced.

"Mine didn't either, the cuffs were practically at my knees," Lucas answered.

"I didn't believe my mom when she said I had a growth spurt until now. She's always complaining about how much I eat. But I can't help it, I'm just so hungry all the time," Dustin moaned, adding a washer to the canister between his knees. "We're going to need to modify the trigger and nozzle to get as much spray distance as possible. Since we're dealing with high pressure, every joint needs to be reinforced. We can't risk any leaks," Dustin spoke to nobody in particular. His rantings were becoming more frequent as the construction of the prototype moved forward.

"Hey, Max, can you pass me that hose over there?" Lucas asked.

Max looked up from her science textbook and stared at him blankly. "Sorry, what did you ask me?"

"Oh, never mind, I'll get it. Sorry to bother you while you were concentrating," Lucas said apologetically.

Without acknowledging him, she bowed her head back into the crease of the textbook. Lucas got up from the floor and retrieved the hose from Max's side. He smiled at her, but she didn't look up.

"So I think I've decided on the correct chemicals to use. It was a matter of researching which chemical combinations would give us the best reaction, and then determining which of those chemicals would be the easiest for us to get our hands on. It wasn't easy, but if we sacrifice a few degrees, we should be able to get what we need without too much trouble."

"I'm going to have to start paying more attention in science if I'm going to keep up with you," Lucas admitted.

With that, Max got up from the floor and plodded down the hallway to the bathroom. "What's with her, man?" Dustin asked. "I know her brother died, but it's like she's getting worse or something. She is way more distracted and spacey than she was even a month ago."

"I know," Lucas sighed. "Don't tell her I told you, but she's been fighting with her step-dad a lot. I think he's taking it out on her somehow, like it's her fault. I heard them fighting and it was brutal. I've never heard anything like it."

"I never fight with my mom," Dustin mused. "And I don't have any brothers or sisters. I only fight with you guys."

"I know. We can argue a little and we always make up, but this was different. She's been really moody because of it and I don't know how to act around her. I just try to be as nice as I can no matter what she does because I have no idea how she'll react. One minute, she's just good old Max, and five minutes later, it's like she has turned into Medusa or something."

"Medusa?" Max said from the doorway.

"Max! I'm sorry, I didn't..." Lucas was cut off.

"You have no idea what it's like!" she shrieked. "My brother died and my step-dad's heart is broken! Sure, he can be mean and yell sometimes, but what do you expect? And it's been no picnic for me either, he was my brother. Sure, he was a pain in the ass and a total bully, but I still loved him. And after everything that happened, we're all lucky to be alive! You have no idea what it's like coming out of that whole nightmare with your brother dead, but you're still alive. How is that fair? It isn't fair at all. I feel rotten every moment of every day because he died and I didn't. Don't talk about things you don't understand. And don't talk about me behind my back!" Max bolted from the bedroom doorway and out the front door.

"Shit," Lucas muttered, dropping his head to his hands.

Part.02

Karen Wheeler put the station wagon in park in front of the Hawkins Police Station. She gathered up her purse and went inside. It was five o'clock and she was there to pick up Nancy from work. Nancy was at a desk at the back of the main office, furiously typing at an old typewriter. Officer Callahan was standing behind her, giving her instructions. Karen immediately noticed how relaxed Nancy was, not a trace of stress to be seen. She also noticed how closely Officer Callahan was standing to Nancy. She searched his body language for more clues about their working relationship. He was speaking in soft tones and smiling, yet there was a stiffness about him, almost as if he was nervous.

"That ought to do it," Officer Callahan said to Nancy. "Thanks so much, that looks great. I can never get that damned typewriter to work for me. You make it look so easy."

"No problem," Nancy smiled. She fed the yellow sheet of paper out of the machine and handed it to him. Callahan looked up and noticed Karen standing by the door. "Looks like quittin' time," he smiled. "Good work today, Nancy. We'll see you tomorrow. How do you do, Mrs. Wheeler?" he nodded to Karen and took refuge from the women in his office.

"Are you ready to go?" Karen asked.

"Not quite. I still have to turn off a bunch of equipment and turn on the answering machine – I can't forget that. I'll be right there." Nancy floated around the office like she had closed up shop there every night for twenty years. She efficiently and methodically finished the evening checklist and, in no time flat, joined her mother at the front door. "Good night, James," she called.

There was no answer from the Officer.

"Let's go," she said and locked the front door behind them once they were outside.

"Wow, you have the keys to the police station," Karen said, genuine pride ringing in her voice.

"It's no big deal, mom. It's not like I have the keys to the holding cell or any of the squad cars."

"Still, it looks like you're getting on really well. You look so composed!" Karen beamed as they got in the car.

"Yeah, it's going well. It's pretty boring actually. None of the office work is very challenging and there's not a lot going on otherwise. James told me that the FBI took over all investigations relating to the Star Court Mall case. The Hawkins Police Department just doesn't have the manpower to handle something like that. It's too bad really, it would have been more interesting than the stuff I'm doing now. When I applied for the job, I was hoping I would get to work on the case, but that's not how it turned out," she sighed. "I do like typing up the reports though. It's pretty cool reading about what really goes on here in town - right under our noses! It's almost like reading a crime novel, just without the embellishment."

"Well, hey, I was thinking, rather than reading a crime novel, how about we rent a movie for tonight? Just you and me?"

Nancy and her mother hadn't spent much time together since she started dating Jonathan. Nancy's initial reaction was to decline, but something made her accept the invitation.

"We can stop by the video store on our way home." Karen steered the station wagon around the corner onto the main street.

Nancy wondered if Steve would be working. She knew he had a job at the video store, but she hadn't been in there since he started. The station wagon stopped in front of the video store and Nancy could see Steve Harrington's hair through the front window. It's not that she didn't like him, he just had been acting immature and aloof lately. It was like she left him behind in high school while she foraged forward into the real world.

Part.03

Eleven stared at the blackness of her surroundings. The familiar scent of ozone hung thick and sweet in the air. She had been pulled to this place by a force not her own. Normally when she ventured to this

place, she could only reach it through pure concentration and strength of will. This time, she could not leave no matter how hard she tried.

She looked around. There was nothing. She tried to concentrate on someone to find them, but in her rising fear she found it difficult to focus on just one person. She wanted Mike, but she also wanted Joyce. Deep in her heart, she wanted Hopper to come to her rescue, but knew that was impossible. She determinedly tried not to panic; she closed her eyes and concentrated deeply on Joyce.

Nothing happened.

Tears welled in Eleven's eyes. She knew she was trapped, but she didn't know how or why. She felt like she had been there for an eternity.

Far in the distance, the sound of footfalls grew out of nothing. Eleven looked around in all directions, but couldn't see anyone in the darkness. The footfalls grew louder, steady and slow. Eleven's heart began to race as she imagined who or what could possibly be there with her. Her breathing quickened. She contemplated running, but knew that running wouldn't do any good in this place.

She focused on the direction of the sound as it grew. Whoever was approaching, she had to meet them face on. There was no other choice, she had no escape.

Then she appeared. A young girl, maybe ten years old, walked straight toward Eleven. She had huge, blue eyes and her long blonde hair hung in a tangle over her shoulders. She was dressed in a flannel nightgown and had bare feet. Eleven stared at the girl - she had never seen her before.

The two girls stood and regarded each other without saying a word. The blonde girl had the most vacant expression Eleven had ever seen. It reminded her of the look her catatonic mother wore as she rocked mindlessly back and forth in her rocking chair. It was a similar expression, but somehow not the same.

Eleven opened her mouth and inhaled to speak, but nothing came

out. Questions like, "who are you?" or "what are you doing here?" seemed inadequate. The staring continued.

Finally, the girl tilted her head and slowly reached toward Eleven with her right hand. Eleven assumed it was an offer to shake hands, and as she looked down to take the girl's hand, she noticed a tattoo.

It read simply: 013.

Part.04

There were only a few stragglers left at the Fairfax newspaper office in the late evening. Jonathan was one of them. He had spent the morning outside taking pictures at the local corn maze. It was for a feel-good story. Jonathan had been assured by Mr. Skinner that the coverage of the corn maze had nothing to do with the fact that the owner of the maze was his brother-in-law.

Jonathan had spent the rest of the day in the dark room, cropping and resizing photos of scarecrows and a petting zoo. He was at his shared desk sorting through the pile of pictures and determining which photos to submit for the story. The overhead lights had been turned off to preserve electricity, so he worked by lamplight, as did anyone else there at that hour. Typewriter typing could be heard from opposing corners of the office.

Bored with the pictures of children patting goats and feeding chickens, Jonathan picked up his portfolio and thumbed through the pages. He had tucked the stray photograph that almost ruined his interview in the back pocket of the folder. He slid it out and studied it like he had a hundred times before. It was out of focus and too dark for his liking. He was relatively inexperienced at photofinishing when the picture was taken. He looked at the grainy image of the demogorgon and decided he could get a better print out of the negative. *Maybe I'll try again when I get some free time in the darkroom*, he thought.

A quiet voice sounded behind him. "My husband has a few photos like that." It was Dolores, the custodian. She was making her evening rounds emptying the wastepaper baskets and disinfecting telephone receivers. She was a pleasant lady who worked silently and slowly,

but always had a smile on her face.

He hadn't heard her behind him and he wondered how long she had been standing there. He quickly slid the photo back into his portfolio. "A few out of focus pictures of the dark?" he said good naturedly. He turned to grin at her.

"No, a few photos of a beast like that." she answered matter-of-factly.

He froze. "A beast like this? What? I mean, this isn't a picture of anything." he stammered, realizing he might be cornered.

"Well, it may not be identical, but Morris has snapped a few of something in the forest behind our house. I wasn't going to say anything to anyone because I had a hard time believing what I saw. But I had a good look at your photo and you bet your britches it's pretty much the same as what Morris took."

Jonathan's mouth fell open. He couldn't believe his ears. She's an older lady who wears the thickest eyeglasses I have ever seen, so she could easily be mistaken, he thought. The notion of a demogorgon in Fairfax sent the sensation of ice water trickling down his spine.

Part.05

The next morning, after the worst night's sleep she had experienced since Will had gone missing, Joyce made the required phone calls to the school and to the Big Apple grocery store. Everyone she talked to was understanding and accommodating. She was informed, however, that she was expected back at the grocery store to work the next day if she wanted to keep her job. This came as no surprise to her; she promised she would be there.

Joyce had driven Will to school that morning rather than have him walk. It was a cloudy morning and the dull light suited her just fine. "Mom," Will started. "I'm really worried about El. I didn't have a good feeling about leaving her in the hospital last night. It just didn't feel right."

"I know what you mean, honey." Joyce agreed. "It never feels right to leave a family member behind."

"She is family, isn't she? I feel like she has always been with us. I can't imagine life without her. Especially now..." he trailed off.

"I know, I know." Joyce consoled as best she could while navigating the early morning traffic. Her son was confiding in her and talking about his feelings. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel like she wasn't listening. "All of the papers for me to adopt El have been sent in. Very soon she will really be your sister." she said brightly.

"I need her. I mean, we need her, in the family," he smiled wistfully.

"I'm glad you feel that way, Will. I feel that way too." With those words, her heart began to ache. She ached to have Jim as part of her family as well, but as soon as she realized it was Jim she was missing, she pushed the feeling away. *I should be missing Bob, not Jim*, she told herself.

She stopped her green Pinto in front of Will's middle school. "I love you, mom," he looked at her as he spoke.

"I love you, too," she smiled. Will got out of the car and Joyce watched him as he ambled toward the school among the other students until he disappeared out of sight.

Part.06

The hospital was a short distance from the school. As instructed to do so the day before, Joyce bypassed Emergency and went straight to the Intensive Care Unit where El's room was. The unit clerk met her at the main desk. "Can I help you?" was the question.

"Yes, I'm Joyce Byers. I'm here to see my daughter, Jane Hopper." Joyce replied as calmly as she could after having no sleep and no breakfast.

"Your daughter," the unit clerk repeated, clicking her tongue. "Mrs. Byers, I'm afraid there is a problem. Would you mind stepping into the Head Nurse's office?"

Joyce immediately tensed. She followed the young clerk to an office behind the unit desk and sat down. "She will be with you in a moment," the clerk assured and closed the office door leaving Joyce

alone with her fears.

Moments later, a tall, stick-like woman entered the office and shut the door. She took a seat at the desk and leaned toward Joyce. "Mrs. Byers, I'm Nurse Allison. I'm sorry to keep you waiting, I imagine you've had a rough night."

Joyce nodded, the bags under her eyes practically swaying with the motion.

"The problem is, and I cannot express my displeasure enough at having to tell you this, but with Jane's adoption process being in its preliminary stages, we cannot accept your instructions for her health care. She is a minor and technically a ward of the State. I've been advised that you are legally only a foster parent at this point." The nurse inhaled and a genuine frown held her mouth.

"What?" Joyce breathed, not entirely certain she understood the nurse correctly. She gathered up enough sense to ask, "What does that mean exactly?"

"It means that her care lies with the State, not you. So as health care providers, we have to take our instructions regarding Jane from the Welfare Office, not from you."

"I don't believe this!" Joyce practically shouted.

Nurse Allison closed her eyes and took a deep breath in preparation for what she had to say next. "There's more, and believe me, Mrs. Byers, being the one who has to tell you this is breaking me in two, but the State has specifically instructed us to cut off all visitors to Jane. I've never seen anything like this before, and heaven knows it doesn't make any sense, but we have to uphold those instructions. I'm afraid I can't let you see her."

Joyce stopped breathing. This was unimaginable. She put both hands on the desk to steady herself as nausea hit her. She stared at the floor for balance. She could not make eye contact with the woman, even though Joyce knew she was not responsible. Joyce knew exactly why these strange instructions had been passed down. It was because of who El was and what she had endured for the first twelve years of

her life at Hawkins National Laboratory. Joyce concluded that the State would probably try to take El away from her. She would not let that happen. She knew exactly who she would contact for help.

Another wave of nausea hit her. Her empty stomach pitched and turned, but she held on.

Nurse Allison regarded her with pure empathy.

"I understand," she said weakly. "Can you please at least tell me how she is doing?"

"I'm not supposed to, but I will. She is the same as yesterday, comatose by all accounts. Every test we submitted over night came back this morning - they were all negative. We are running more tests, but won't know anything more for a few days." she looked pained. "Mrs. Byers, I am so sorry this is happening. Please know that I and my staff will do our absolute best for Jane. I promise."

"I know," Joyce muttered, a plan of action formulating in her head. "I'll leave you to it then, I guess." Joyce rose slowly from the desk, her face pale and pasty. A tear streaked down her cheek, but she quickly brushed it away.

"Good bye, Mrs. Byers," called Nurse Allison as she left the office. "You have my promise." Her voice cracked with emotion as she spoke.

In the hallway, Joyce paused, not sure which direction to take. In her hesitation Dr. Svenson approached her. The weight in her heart blinded her to his thick, blond hair and charming good looks. "Mrs. Byers, I understand Nurse Allison has spoken to you?" he stood in front of her, but she barely glanced at him.

"She explained the situation, yes." Joyce croaked.

"I'm really sorry, there is nothing I can do. I would be breaking ethical protocol if I didn't follow instructions." He sounded apologetic, but somehow insincere.

"I understand the situation, Doctor." Joyce lifted her head to meet his eyes. "Are you sure you can't make any exceptions? I just want to see

her."

"I'm afraid I can't, Mrs. Byers. Jane is in a delicate state and until we know what is causing her coma, it is best to keep all contact to a minimum. Plus, I could lose my job. Now, if you'll excuse me, it has been a very busy morning." He strode off, leaving Joyce standing at the unit desk, still unsure which direction to take.

She watched his white lab coat flap and disappear through a door at the end of the hallway and she decided she hated him. He could bend the rules like Nurse Allison had, but he wouldn't. He looked nice, but he wasn't. *He is just like the rest of them*, she thought.

The room Dr. Svenson had entered was El's. She laid in the hospital bed how Nurse Allison explained, comatose. A bandage covered her nose and her mouth hung open slightly. The curtains were drawn closed, keeping out the muted daylight. Dr. Svenson reviewed the heart rate monitor and checked the chart clipped to the end of the bed. Then, before leaving the room, stopped beside her bed. Placing one hand at the head of the bed, he hung over her with his tall frame and looked closely at her face, their noses almost touching. The skin under her eyes had turned blue and the bandages at her nose were red with blood. He hovered over her face and stared at her eyelids, almost as if he was expecting her to wake up. He breathed in deeply and paused, closing his eyes. Breathing deeply again, he considered her hair, eyeing her hairline from ear to ear.

Then he backed away from her, as if almost disgusted by her. He eyed her with distaste. He stretched and straightened his posture, then turned away from her to leave the room to attend to his next patient.

Part.07

Nancy and Karen entered the video store just as Steve disappeared into the back office. They began perusing the new releases and paused to chat quietly. It was slow in the video store as it was a weekday afternoon. Keith stared at Nancy as she and her mother strolled about the store. He had been in love with Nancy for as long as he could remember. He tried to drum up enough courage to walk over and offer her his assistance in picking out a movie. He hesitated

and it was his undoing. Steve appeared from the back office and spotted them. He strutted up to them, "Hi, Nancy. Hi, Mrs. Wheeler," he said with a grin.

"Hi Steve," Karen returned with a smile.

Robyn and Keith watched the scene from safely behind the cash register. Keith knew he had made a mistake by not immediately pouncing on Nancy and now Nancy was being bombarded with the full spectrum of Steve Harrington's charms. Robyn stared in disgust. She had never liked Nancy and had never liked Steve liking Nancy. She and Keith both knew that Jonathan had moved away and individually wondered how long it would take Steve to move back into his old territory with Nancy.

Steve recommended several movies to the women. He spoke animatedly and smiled a lot. He started leaning closer and closer towards Nancy and Robyn was considering putting a stop to it. For Steve's sake, she told herself. She saw Karen shake her head a few times at Steve's recommendations while Nancy stayed relatively silent. After a few moments, the three of them approached the cash register where Keith took charge.

"What did we decide on, ladies?" he asked, doing his best Steve Harrington impression.

"American Dreamer," Steve answered for them. "I couldn't talk them into Night of the Comet."

"I just don't think zombie movies are for us," Karen laughed.

"They're not actual zombies, they're comet zombies. There's a difference." Steve said it like it was the most important distinction in the world.

"Hey, Nancy," he said after a pause. "Maybe we can get together and watch a movie sometime. You know, my treat."

Nancy paused and Robyn, Keith and Karen all stared at her waiting to hear her response. Nancy glanced at them all staring at her and blushed slightly. She decided this was not the time to be difficult

with Steve. She looked up at him and said, "Yeah, sure, a movie sometime would be great."

"Awesome!" Steve exclaimed happily. "I'll call you then and we'll make plans. Take care ladies." He waved and smiled as they left the store without further comment.

The door closed and Steve turned to face his co-workers with a huge grin on his face. "I can't believe what I just saw, Harrington." Robyn sneered. "I feel like I'm gonna puke."

"You're such a smooth dog!" Keith congratulated. "I mean, for you to get back with Nancy would be the victory of the century. My cap is off to you, good chap," he bowed with a flourish. Steve returned Keith's silly bow.

"Well, I suppose she is actually pretty cute." Robyn acquiesced. The two men stared at her in surprise, then simultaneously started nodding. "You know it!" Steve chortled.

Steve and Keith wheeled the returns cart through the store, replacing returned videos, chatting loudly and leaving Robyn at the front to sort out her feelings about Steve dating Nancy again. No matter how she looked at it, she didn't like it, but she couldn't pinpoint why.

Part.08

It was close to ten in the evening when the telephone rang. Joyce had only been home from work a few minutes and rushed to answer. "Hello, Mrs. Byers," she heard a familiar voice say on the other end of the line.

"Hello, Mike," she answered, dreading the explanation she was going to have to give him about El's situation.

"Is Will home?" he asked like he had a hundred times before.

"No, Will is out with Jonathan. I actually can't believe they're not home yet. Can he call you back?" Joyce hoped that Mike only wanted to talk to Will.

"That's okay. Can I talk to El, please?"

"She's not here either," Joyce winced, realizing she was going to have to tell the young man at least part of the truth. "Mike, I don't want you to worry, but El is in the hospital getting some tests done right now. She won't be home for a few days."

"The hospital?" he gasped. "Is she okay? What happened?"

"Mike, please don't worry. She just passed out the other day and everyone wants to be sure there isn't anything seriously wrong with her. There is nothing to worry about. I'll have her call you as soon as she gets home."

"Are you sure she's okay?" he asked again.

"Yes, Mike. Everything is fine. Just give the doctors a bit of time to do their job."

He paused and Joyce could hear his breath through the long-distance line. "Can you please have Will call me back?" he asked pitifully.

"Of course, I'll get him to call you tomorrow."

"Ok, bye, Mrs. Byers."

"Bye, Mike."

Mike hung up the phone and then slumped onto the basement couch. El had warned him that her loss of consciousness was not normal. He sat quietly and wondered what he could possibly do to help her.

Part.09

Eleven and the young girl stood staring at each other. Eleven searched her memories long and hard to find any trace of the girl at the Hawkins National Laboratory, but found none. She only had the vaguest of memories of Eight and another older girl, but no younger girls. The silence was becoming to be too much for Eleven to bear. She thought that we would go crazy standing in the dark staring at a stranger who wouldn't talk.

Eleven spoke out of irritation. "Can you speak?"

The girl tilted her head and looked at Eleven as if she did not understand. The vacant expression she wore looked to Eleven like she was concentrating on something far in the distance. She looked as if she was staring out into space, willing a star to fall.

The blonde girl did not answer the question, but after a brief interval, closed her eyes tightly, held her breath and began to shake. Eleven watched her convulse, afraid of what would happen next. When she finally stopped quaking and opened her eyes, the glassiness had disappeared from them and they were focused and sharp. She looked directly at Eleven and said, "I'm sorry for not speaking. I was using my concentration for something else. But now that I'm free, I can answer your questions."

Eleven was shocked at the sound of her voice, but was grateful to begin communicating. "What were you concentrating on?" asked Eleven, knowing full well how much focus she needed to use her own psychokinetic abilities.

"Oh, that's unimportant at the moment. To be honest, Eleven, I've been searching for you for quite some time. And the funny thing is, the reasons for my wanting to find you have been compounding over the years. At first, I wanted to find you because you were the only one I knew of who was like me. I thought that together we would be able look after each other. We're not like normal people, you know. Except you are quite normal now. You have lost your telekinesis - that is a pity. You have also lost your ability to navigate this place, also a pity."

"How do you know that?" Eleven felt immediately defensive.

"I know everything," she whispered.

3. Episode 03 - flayed flesh

Part 01

El's hospital room was dark and quiet, the blinds were closed and it was late evening. Her appearance had changed considerably since she was admitted. Her brown, wavy hair was gone and in its place were half a dozen electrodes adhered to her bald scalp by sticky pads. She had an IV in her arm that dripped an unmarked liquid silently into the vein beneath her skin. The circles under her eyes had darkened, but the bandages at her nose had been removed.

The door swung open noiselessly and Dr. Svenson entered. He reviewed the brain scan monitor and the IV and seemed satisfied at what he saw. He did not linger in the room or pay any particular attention to El. Once he had assured himself that her care was as he had instructed, he left the room and closed the door behind him.

Part 02

The sun had gone down when Jonathan and Will pulled up in front of Dolores' house. She had invited Jonathan over for dinner so that her husband could show him his photos of what she called the "beast". Dolores and her husband lived in an old, well-kept home on the opposite end of town from the Byers.

Will was buzzing with anticipation and skepticism at the prospect of seeing pictures of a demogorgon. He had chatted nearly non-stop on the drive to dinner, enumerating to Jonathan all the reasons he thought the pictures would be fake. The boys' mother was at work for the evening, so dinner with Dolores was an excellent alternative to cooking a meal for themselves.

"Welcome!" called Dolores after they rang the bell. "Come in, come in! I've just taken the lasagne out of the oven." Will and Jonathan gave each other a knowing smile.

The television was on in the dark living room and the flickering light illuminated the form of Dolores' husband.

"Boys, this is my husband, Morris." she said.

"Morris and Dolores?" Will asked, incredulously.

"For the past 45 years!" Morris cheered as he rose from his recliner in the living room. "I wouldn't have it any other way," he snuggled his wife's cheek and she giggled. Will suppressed a gag and rolled his eyes.

Morris was a stout man with no hair on his head. The lines on his aged face showed evidence of a lifetime of smiling rather than frowning. Jonathan instantly liked the old man and was growing more and more curious about the photos by the minute. He wanted to ask about them right away, but didn't want to appear rude-it was a dinner invitation after all.

They sat down to eat the piping hot lasagne with buttered green beans and rolls. Morris was a friendly, chatty man and an hour was easily spent telling stories, laughing and eating. Finally, Morris turned to Jonathan and asked, "So, did you bring yours?"

Jonathan was grateful to Morris for finally bringing up the topic. "I did," he answered. "But I'd like to see yours first."

"You bet, small fry." Morris stood from the table and ambled toward the den on the other side of the living room.

Dolores grinned at Jonathan. "You're going to love this!" she exclaimed.

Both boys knew they would not love it if the pictures turned out to be authentic. Will held his breath to keep himself still. He was almost crawling out of his skin with fear and excitement.

Morris returned from the den with a handful of 5 by 7 inch photos. "I took these in my backyard only a month ago." He handed them to Jonathan.

Will got out of his chair and stood behind his brother. Jonathan perused each photo carefully. They were dark and grainy, just like Jonathan's, but the photos were not of a demogorgon.

"It looks like the Mind Flayer," Will breathed.

Part 03

Nancy sat behind the front desk in the Hawkins Police Station. She was sorting mail and stamping the incoming forms with date stamps, just like Florence had taught her. She was quietly humming to herself and thinking about Jonathan, imagining him at the Fairfax newspaper, adored and respected by his co-workers. Quietly, Officer Callahan stepped out of his office and navigated the desks to reach Nancy.

"Ahem," he coughed quietly. "Oh hi, Sean. What's up?"

"Well, I was thinking," he started, then paused. "And I don't know what gave me this idea, but I was wondering if you wanted to come with me to the firing range after work today. I think it's something you would enjoy."

Nancy smiled at the accuracy of his assumption. "Actually, I would love to go to the firing range with you. I'm out of practice."

"So you do know how to shoot?" he asked excitedly.

"Well, yeah. I've done a bit of shooting. I'm always up for more. Makes me feel..."

"More in control?" he offered.

"Yeah, I guess it does."

"Well, in that case, we'll go straight there at five. We can take my car."

"Great!"

He blushed slightly, then ducked his head and rounded the desks back to his office.

Nancy finished sorting the mail, her mood significantly brightened by the prospect of the evening.

Part 04

"Mike? It's Will," he said, practically whispering into the phone receiver.

"Will, what's going on? Where's El?" Mike demanded.

"She's in the hospital. There's a problem with the adoption and we're not allowed to see her." Will gave up more information than Joyce would have liked him to, but he was not about to keep secrets.

"When did you see her last?"

"When I rode in the ambulance with her to the hospital. I got to see her in the hospital, but after that, they told my mom we weren't allowed in anymore. But Mike, I've got something huge to tell you. There's something going on. I don't think it's safe here."

"What do you mean?"

"There is a huge possibility that the Mind Flayer is in Fairfax."

"How do you know that?" Mike could not believe what he was hearing. Will described the pictures Morris had taken only a month prior.

"We're going to stake out the woods on the other side of town to see if we can catch a glimpse. We have to know for sure whether or not it's true."

"Holy smokes!" Mike exclaimed. "Dustin is going to love this."

"What do you mean?" Will asked. Mike told Will all about the Gorgon Busters and how Dustin had been building a prototype chemical weapon pack and when it was ready, he would make one for each of them to defeat the Mind Flayer.

"And I'm missing all of this?" he whined. "Everything is wrong. How could the Mind Flayer get out without a gate being open?"

"I don't know. We don't know much about it."

"When is Dustin's weapon going to be ready? I don't think we have much time before something terrible happens."

Part 05

"Dustin, you're almost 15," Mrs. Henderson pleaded. "Please, please, please go into the bathroom and shave. At least some of it. Maybe you could wear a nice mustache, like Burt Reynolds."

"Mom, I don't need to shave, I have better things to do than worry about a little stubble. Plus, I shaved like, four days ago," he called from his room.

"Dustin, I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. You are a young man and you need to shave now. Don't make me tell you again." the exasperation in her voice was heavy.

"Alright, but realize you're making me take time away from very important scientific work." Dustin left the chaos of the makeshift shop in his bedroom and went to the bathroom to get the unnecessary grooming over with as quickly as possible.

He removed his ball cap and reached for the shaving cream that his mom had bought as a not-so-subtle hint. He squirted far more than he needed into his hand and watched the foam expand. He smeared it onto his face in one long motion then he stopped and watched himself in the mirror. He shook his head vigorously and observed the foam cling to his face without budging. "That's it!" he squealed. He moved the foam around his face until he was covered up to his eyes. He picked up his new safety razor (another present from his mother) and shaved happily as the wonderful implications of his discovery danced through his mind.

Part 06

Sean and Nancy spent the early evening shooting rounds at the firing range across town. Sean was impressed with Nancy's skills and told her so several times. Nancy enjoyed the activity immensely and her imagination started wandering to different scenarios where she could have her own gun, and use it.

Their conversation progressed to Nancy asking questions about properly aiming for moving targets and evaluating effective cover positions. Sean was impressed with her questions and was happy to

answer. He had never spent time with a woman who had shown an interest in the kinds of things Nancy had.

"Are you enjoying working at the station?" he enquired as they wrapped up for the evening.

"Oh yeah, it's great. It's a lot better than working at the newspaper. Those guys, no disrespect intended..." she paused, alluding to the tragedy that had occurred in the summer with the editor's family, "that place wasn't exactly somewhere someone like me could spread my wings and fly, you know?"

"Based on Holloway's reputation, I don't find that hard to believe, no disrespect intended, " he agreed.

Nancy smiled, knowing she was understood.

"Well, if you're ever interested in joining the force, there's plenty of room to spread your wings and fly. It's never boring, and you're certainly bright enough."

Nancy stared at him. She had never considered pursuing a career as a policewoman. The idea had intense appeal to her, but in the moment, she was just happy having spent the evening with Sean Callahan.

Part 07

"Okay you guys. I realized last night that the chemical formula is missing a few key elements. No pun intended. I had the right idea, just the wrong application."

"Now what's he talking about," groaned Lucas.

"I'm bored already," Mike agreed with Lucas's sentiment.

"You guys, this is important. Don't you realize what was about to happen? We were about to spray free-flowing chemicals all over the place without realizing the fallout."

"Which is?" Lucas asked on cue.

"The chemicals would just run off the demogorgon or the demodogs,

as the case may be, and the full impact of the exothermic reaction would be lost."

"So then, what's the answer? Since you already have it figured out," Mike said.

"The solution needs a thickening agent and a foaming agent. Both inert, of course."

"So, you're trying to turn the chemicals into foam? Won't that affect the type and size of nozzle we'll need for the pack?" Mike enquired.

"Indeed it will, my good friend," Dustin smiled.

"I can't wait to see this!" a confident, sarcastic voice said from the shadow of the doorframe.

"Erica, get out of here," Lucas said.

"Whatever. If you guys think that you're going to pull this off without killing yourselves, you're dumber than you look."

"Like you know anything about it. Now scram," Lucas ordered.

"I'd stay and help you, but I think I'd rather watch you crash and burn instead," She bounced off the doorframe and out of sight.

Dustin watched Erica leave and felt a pang of guilt. He knew how clever she was and silently wondered what her objection to his invention was. "Anyway," Dustin continued. "I've got the parts for the modifications, so I'll get that started. I have to do some research to determine exactly what we will use for the thickening and foaming agents, then we just need to pick them up and we will have a working prototype."

"Then we can run tests! That will be awesome!" Lucas grinned at the thought of doing target practice with a high-pressure foam gun.

Part 08

In the darkness, Eleven carefully asked, "What do you mean you know everything? Can you read minds?"

"Not exactly. Sometimes I can, but the source of my knowledge is much more interesting than simple telepathy."

"Tell me," Eleven prompted.

"I have every intention of telling you everything. After all, we are practically sisters, aren't we?" her face twisted into something like a smile, but her eyes remained mirthless.

"At the Hawkins Laboratory I was deathly lonely, as I'm sure you were. I was very young when I was taken away from my family and was left alone in my room for days at a time. I don't know, sometimes I think they didn't understand what my special abilities were because I was always left alone."

Eleven felt pity for the girl. She remembered how horrible it had been to be locked away in a tiny room, only to be forced into performing terrifying and confusing experiments with Papa and other scientists.

"When I was old enough to understand more about myself and my powers, I was able to search for a friend, and I found one. Now she is my best friend and we would die for each other," she emphasized.

"Who is your friend?" Eleven asked, utterly perplexed.

"She is Cthaeghya, one of the most ancient and powerful beings to ever live." A serene smile spread across her lips as she fondly thought of their bond.

Eleven was alarmed by her answer. It sounded like her friend was not human, and the only non-humans she knew of were from the Upside Down. Eleven knew better than to think the girl's friend was imaginary. "Is she a monster?" Eleven asked.

"A monster? No, she is the most wonderful friend in the world." Thirteen's eyes danced.

"What does she look like?" Eleven pursued.

"She is beautiful and wise and strong-stronger than anyone or anything on earth," the wistful look on Thirteen's face intensified to

the point where she appeared insane.

Eleven thought carefully about how to question the girl further. "How big is she?" she ventured.

"She can be as tall as a skyscraper or as small as a teacup," the girl said proudly, holding her hands as if she were petting a mouse.

Eleven was getting nowhere with this type of questioning. She knew she had to drive answers from this girl. "Does Cthaeghya have great, long legs?"

"Yes, of course. Why are you asking me? You've seen her!" she exclaimed excitedly.

Eleven's skin prickled as her simple question yielded the most blood-chilling answer possible. The great, ancient, wise creature could only be the Mind Flayer.

Part 09

Steve Harrington stood at the front door of the Wheelers' house like he had many times before. He was there to pick up Nancy for their movie night. Nervously, he rang the doorbell and put on his best nice-guy smile. The door opened and Ted Wheeler stood in front of him. "Good evening, Mr. Wheeler. I'm here to pick up Nancy."

"Hi Steve, good to see you," Ted answered semi-cheerfully. "Karen, is Nancy home?" he called into the house.

"I don't think so. I think she went to the shooting range with Sean again," Karen shouted from the living room.

"Sean who?" Steve asked, completely stunned.

"Callahan, I think," said Ted. "He's a cop anyway. They work together. Do you want to come inside and wait for her? They're usually never out late."

Feeling desperate, Steve heard himself saying, "Yeah, sure. Thanks!"

Ted moved aside for Steve to join them in the living room. They were

watching television and eating popcorn. He sat on the opposite end of the couch from Mrs. Wheeler while Ted occupied his recliner.

By the time the second commercial break started, Steve concluded that he had been forgotten and could no longer endure the polite company of Nancy's parents. "You know, I think I may have gotten the day wrong for movie night. I should go."

"Are you sure, Steve?" Karen said. "You're more than welcome to stay. Nancy should be home any minute."

"No, thank you. I'll see Nancy another time. Enjoy the rest of your evening," he said and excused himself out the front door.

He knew he hadn't shown up on the wrong day. He only had one day off that week and wouldn't have made a mistake while making plans with Nancy. He kicked at the gravel in the driveway and sulkily got into his BMW and sped away.

Part 10

It was a crisp November morning when Nurse Allison started her shift at Fairfax Hospital. The night crew had punched out for the day and the Head Nurse travelled from room to room in the Intensive Care Unit, checking on her patients' well-being. When she entered Jane Hopper's room, Dr. Svenson was adjusting the IV. "Good morning, doctor. Would you like me to do that for you?"

"No, no," he replied. "I don't mind. Her brain activity is looking good today, perhaps we will see some improvement." He smiled his dimpled smile at her.

She smiled back, but could not suppress the disapproval she felt for his methods. She was certain that shaving the girl's hair was not necessary. I've never, ever seen that in my entire career, she thought. She could only bring herself to casually mention, "It's a pity about her hair. She's going to be upset when she wakes up, I bet."

"Why would she be upset?" he asked unfeelingly. "We are trying to save her life here. She has a good chance now that we have this updated equipment. We can monitor her brain activity with this

computer like we never could before. If anything, she should be grateful."

Nurse Allison shrank. He's probably right, she thought. She reminded herself that he had extensive experience as a head physician at the Indianapolis Psychiatric Hospital before he relocated to Fairfax a month ago. "If everything is okay here, I'll continue my rounds. You'll check in with me regarding C Wing when you have a moment?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Nurse."

She left the room and continued with her morning's work, trying to suppress the dread she felt whenever she had to deal with the new, overly-qualified and alarmingly good-looking Dr. Svenson.

The doctor remained in the room with Jane. He checked the brain activity monitor one last time before he paused at the door, stretching.

From beneath the collar of his crisp, white lab coat, gray-black tendrils, like fingers, protruded from underneath his skin and crawled up the sides of his neck. As quickly as they appeared, they diminished, and Dr. Svenson stretched again and left the room.

Part 11

"So she stood you up, so what?" sneered Robyn. Robyn had absolved herself of her own hypocrisy in not wanting Steve to date Nancy, but at the same time being angry at Nancy for standing him up.

"Yeah, she was at the shooting range with some dickhead policeman. How bizarre is that?" he said, running a comb through his hair in preparation for the use of a large helping of hairspray.

"Little Nancy Wheeler with a gun?" Robyn teased, then stopped. She could only recall a few fuzzy images in her drugged state on the Fourth of July, but she seemed to remember something about Nancy having a gun. She decided the idea wasn't completely ludicrous after all.

"I just was really hoping she and I could get back together. But now I know how unimportant I am to her," he said peering at Robyn

wistfully as she leaned over another college application.

"There are plenty of fish in the sea," Robyn quipped without looking up from the application. "But you're coming over to my parent's house on Sunday for dinner, right?"

"Yeah, I guess I am. Though I don't know what you need me for."

"We're friends. I have friends over for dinner all the time," she said, making the invitation sound less than special.

"Yup, we're friends," he muttered and then let loose on a can of Farrah Fawcett hairspray.

Part 12

Joyce sat alone in her front room with her legs tucked up underneath herself. She was home from the evening shift at the Big Apple and was drinking a cup of tea. She wanted desperately to see El. She had left countless messages that week with Dr. Owens's office, but he hadn't returned her calls. She knew it was most likely too late in the day to hear from him. She had been debating whether or not to drive to see him, but decided against it because of her job and tight financial situation. She had also left several messages with the Adoption Coordinator, but heard nothing back from them either.

She had felt empowered that morning, but the lack of traction gained during the day left her deflated. She closed her eyes and all she saw was Jim Hopper's smiling face. Grief gripped her-she missed him terribly. He had sacrificed himself for the greater good, but in that moment, Joyce was angry with him for his valiance. She thought he should be there with her, close to El and the boys. Joyce realized that Jim was what she wanted more than anything in the world. She sobbed.

Will appeared from the kitchen. "Are you okay, mom?" he asked. He climbed onto the couch beside her and put his arm around her. "It's going to be okay. We've been in worse trouble than this and come out okay. We just have to stick together."

Will's naive confidence made her smile. Will always made her smile.

"I did my best today, but didn't get anywhere. It's getting me down, kiddo," she admitted as she wiped her face dry.

"We can't win every day, I guess," he said gently.

The moon was visible through the window and the two just stared at it, comforting each other in silence as only family can.

As if a cold draft floated through the room, Will's skin began to prickle. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Dread filled his stomach as he realized what he was feeling. He turned to his mother to alert her when the lamp next to the couch started to flicker. The kitchen light followed suit.

"Mom!" Will shouted. She put an arm across his chest to quiet him and watched the lights intently. The lights in the living room flickered again. Will looked terrified. "Hopper!?" Joyce gasped.

Part 13

Eleven was silent for a long time after realizing that the Mind Flayer was Thirteen's "best friend". Eleven wondered if she knew that the gate to the Upside Down was closed. Does she know how many people the Mind Flayer has killed and how evil it is? she wondered

Thirteen seemed completely content standing wordlessly with Eleven. She did not elaborate on the description of her friend. She simply stared at Eleven with her huge, blue eyes, unmoving. Eleven decided she had nothing to lose by antagonizing the girl. "Your friend is trapped. You cannot get to her."

"You can't trap Cthaeghya," Thirteen replied with her crazy-looking smile. "You only think that because you don't understand."

Eleven considered the possibility that the Mind Flayer was free from the Upside Down and that possibility unlocked a gruesome fear in her heart. To calm herself, she told herself that Thirteen was mistaken.

Thirteen continued, "As you know, she has to use the flesh of lesser beings in order to physically interact with our world-that was how you were able to see her and touch her. What you don't know is that she is benevolent and would have returned the bodies she had taken

when her work was done," Thirteen paused and leaned toward Eleven with her small frame. "You think you exiled her to her own world, but all you did was kill all the people she borrowed."

Eleven swallowed hard, knowing what the young girl said was true. "She is still very dangerous," Eleven cautioned.

"Only to her enemies," Thirteen countered and the vacant smile on her face shifted into a sadistic scowl.

4. Episode 04 - the gatekeeper

Part 01

The front door of the Hawkins Police Station flew open with a loud bang and three men entered, one unwillingly. Nancy stared at the young man being dragged by his arms into the Station, she couldn't help herself. Callahan and Powell hefted him to the lockup across from the main office as Nancy stared after them. That was the most exciting thing that had happened at the Station since she started.

After an interval, Powell and Callahan returned to their desks to fill out the necessary paperwork on the perpetrator. Curiosity got the better of Nancy, she was hungry for action of any kind. She leaned on Callahan's office doorway. "What's he in for?" she asked casually.

"Copyright violation. Recording and distributing copyrighted material for profit," he sounded less than excited. Nancy was disappointed that the young man's crimes weren't more exciting. "I'll interview him later. We will need him to point out all the people who purchased from him."

"What was he selling?"

"He was recording current movies with a home video recorder in the movie theater, making copies, then selling them."

"And people are stupid enough to buy them? That's crazy."

"Yeah well, people are people, Nancy." He didn't look up and she knew the conversation was over.

Part 02

Dustin, Mike, Lucas and Max all steered their bicycles down the hill outside of Hawkins. Dustin carried the completed prototype Gorgon Buster on his back. Rather than use dangerous chemicals, they were going to test it with a combination of soap, water and starch. Lucas had never been more excited in his life and led the group on their bikes.

"This looks like a good spot," Mike suggested and the four of them slowed to a stop.

"Yeah, it's wide open, but we need a target," Dustin observed.

"There's some old logs over there. We would stand them up against each other in the middle of that field,"

"Sure," Dustin consented.

The four teens deposited their bikes outside the fence and climbed over into the field. It was a rough job moving and setting up the logs. They were heavy, dirty and full of bugs and splinters. After a short while, the target was assembled a good distance into the sunlit field.

"Who gets to test it first?" asked Lucas excitedly. He desperately wanted the first try, but knew he wouldn't get it.

"I think I better test it first, since I'm the only one who knows how this thing works," replied Dustin. Nobody countered him. "Switch me on," he said with a wide grin. Mike leaned over and turned on the electric pump. "I've been waiting months to say that," Dustin said, satisfied with himself.

The motor quietly rumbled and as the pitch increased, Dustin knew the pressure was building. "You guys better stand back."

Max grabbed Lucas's arm and stood behind him. She didn't trust Dustin's mechanical abilities and was certain the whole thing was going to explode.

Lucas covered Max's hand with his own and held his breath. He couldn't wait to see the pressurized foam shoot with enough force to knock over their freshly built target.

Mike stood back, unsure of what would happen, or if anything would happen. He had given so little input into the construction of the prototype, that he wasn't entirely sure how it was supposed to work. Instead, he had been mulling over Will's news that the Mind Flayer might be back and hoped as hard as he could that the weapon would actually work against it.

Dustin fearlessly pulled the trigger and yelled, "Here we go!"

The nozzle of the Gorgon Buster sputtered and spat out a few drops of white soap. Dustin kept his finger on the trigger and suddenly a great stream of white liquid jetted from the weapon. Lucas started jumping up and down and cheering, but noticed that the foam was only travelling about eight yards. Dustin had calculated fifteen yards. Nobody else was saying anything, so Lucas stopped cheering and watched. Without letting go of the trigger, Dustin reached to the end of the spray nozzle and tightened a gasket. The strong spray flew out even further. Dustin adjusted it again and the high-powered stream of thick soap reached the target and began covering the logs in foam.

"YAY!" they all cheered and jumped.

Dustin let go of the trigger and slowly and dramatically turned to face his friends. "And that, my friends, is how we are going to defeat the Mind Flayer if it ever shows up here again."

"Ok my turn," said Lucas, practically salivating at the thought of shooting the weapon.

"You guys," Mike started in a serious tone. They all turned to look at him, annoyed that he would try to ruin their celebration. "I talked to Will the other night and he had some bad news."

"Well, what is it?" asked Max impatiently.

"El is in the hospital," he started, everyone stared at him wordlessly. "She's going to be okay, but there is a bigger problem."

"What could be worse than El being in the hospital?" demanded Max.

"One thing could be worse. Will says there is a man there in Fairfax with a recent photo of the Mind Flayer."

"Oh man," moaned Lucas.

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Dustin asked, clearly annoyed.

"Because what if the weapon didn't work? What could we do about it? The last time we tangled with the Flayer it almost killed us. If the

gate hadn't been closed, we would all be dead." He looked at Max apologetically.

"But we have the Gorgon Buster now. We're going to Fairfax for Thanksgiving. We can take care of it." Dustin said confidently.

"Look, Will wants to see for himself before he believes this old man. We wait for the intel, Dustin."

"Poor El," said Max.

"Ok, now that that's settled, can I PLEASE have a turn on the Gorgon Buster?" Lucas interrupted. Max stared at him, angry at his obliviousness.

Part 03

Even though it was early November, Joyce Byers had the Christmas decorations out. She was looking for the lights specifically. Will remembered seeing the alphabet of multi-colored lights on the wall after he was rescued from the Upside Down. His mom was doing it again-it was the most logical thing to do. Will was an enthusiastic helper, guiding strings of lights along and handing his mom tacks and tape and whatever else she asked for. After they tacked the zee to the wall, they stood back and double-checked their work. "A-B-C-D-E-F-G..." Will sang quietly.

Joyce left the front room for the kitchen and Will regarded their handiwork. He took a remaining string of lights and added to the bottom of the alphabet.

Joyce returned from the kitchen and saw the newly added 'yes' and 'no'. "Good thinking, that's very clever of you." She ruffled Will's hair. "Now we wait. I know he's going to talk to us." Joyce stood wide-eyed in front of the decorated wall and waited.

Part 04

Dinner with Robyn's parents consisted of overcooked steak, scalloped potatoes and mushy greens, the kind that Steve could not stand. He chatted with Robyn's dad about random things and everyone appeared to be enjoying themselves. "Steve, can I offer you a glass of

wine?" Mr. Buckley said jovially.

"Certainly, Mr. Buckley. Thank you," he replied and gave Robyn the kind of smile only Steve Harrington could give. Robyn uncomfortably looked away.

The evening wore on and Steve and Robyn's dad had several glasses of wine each. Finally the conversation turned to Robyn's college applications. "I really want you to go to a school around here," her mother pleaded.

"I know mom, but I haven't decided what I want for an undergraduate degree, so I think it's best to go to a more liberal college where I can get a well-rounded education."

"Are you headed off to college, Steve?" Mr. Buckley asked.

"Not yet, sir," Steve smiled, clearly enjoying his wine. "I may wait and see where Robyn goes."

"Good man," said Mr. Buckley and slapped him on the shoulder. Steve knew what the old man thought—that he and Robyn were an item. He had suspected her parents thought they were dating and he didn't like it.

"I just don't want you far away from home. I want you to be able to come home often." Her mother looked very serious.

"Bryn Mawr isn't that far away. It's only in Massachusetts," Robyn countered.

"It's further than I'd like you to be. Can you please reconsider?" her mom asked sincerely.

"Plus, Steve can't go to Bryn Mawr. But I'm sure there's plenty of other colleges around there that would take you," he half-joked.

"I don't need Steve to come with me to college," Robyn protested, giving him a squinty stare.

Without being asked, Steve suddenly piped up and said, "You only want to go to Bryn Mawr because you like girls."

Robyn's parents stared at Steve in disbelief. Robyn fumed, she wanted to jump over the dining room table and throttle him. "What? What's that supposed to mean? Are you telling me that you and Steve here aren't dating?" her father asked.

Robyn paused and the pause gave her father the chance to sum up the truth. "So what you're saying, my daughter, is that you are a... a... lesbian?" He said the word like his mouth was full of something vile. Mrs. Buckley sat with eyes wide and mouth open.

"Steve, you better go," Robyn hissed with all the fury she possessed.

Steve realized what he had done and stood from the table. He opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it and retreated out the front door.

Part 05

"This is the fifth night in a row we've done this and we still haven't seen it," Will protested. "I don't think the Mind Flayer is here. The gate was closed."

"Do you really want to take that chance?" Jonathan asked. "If you don't want to come with me, stay home."

New Order's *We All Stand* floated eerily from the stereo speakers in Jonathan's room. Will sat on the bed and sulked. He didn't want to believe that the Mind Flayer was roaming the streets of Fairfax. But he did want to believe that there was a way to rescue Hopper from the Upside Down. An open gate would make both ideas possible. "I'll come with you," he said, determined to be brave.

"Good man," Jonathan said as he loaded his Canon camera with 1600 ISO film. He snapped the back of the camera closed and ensured that the end of the film had caught the spool inside. He advanced the film and snapped a few shots, then deposited the camera into its case and flung the strap over his shoulder. He switched off the record player and the two boys left the house before their mother was due home from work.

They drove to Morris and Delores's house in the dark as they had the

four previous nights. Dressed in black, they met Morris on the driveway. He was armed with his own camera and several flashlights. "Are you ready?" he asked. "I have a good feeling about tonight."

I don't, thought Will. It was chilly, even for November, so Will put up his hood and followed the men to the backyard. They sat next to the hedge in lawn chairs, facing the woods that spread out for miles behind the house. The forest was pitch dark and all they could hear was the rustle of leaves and the hoot of an owl far in the distance.

"So you boys still aren't going to tell me what this thing is," Morris said in a low voice.

Jonathan and Will exchanged glances. They had taken for granted the fact that Morris hadn't asked a lot of questions about the "beast", but was still game to get a better look.

"Well," started Jonathan. "If it were easy to explain, I would have. The problem is that it's a little difficult to believe."

Morris nodded in agreement. He knew that what he had seen and photographed was real and unexplainable. He remained quiet.

Jonathan took a breath and asked, "Did you read about Hawkins in the newspapers or see anything on the news over the summer?"

"Yes. It all sounded a bit far-fetched to me - Satanists and Russians. It sounded made up."

"Well, parts of that were true," said Will quietly. "But what it's really about is what we're waiting for here tonight." He shivered with cold.

"I see," hummed Morris, considering Will's explanation.

They sat in silence for the better part of an hour when the neighbor's back door opened and closed. The three of them perked up at the noise and turned to see who was there, but saw no one. The nape of Will's neck bristled. "It's here!" he whispered, panic in his voice, "I can feel it!"

Jonathan raised his camera, but he knew it was too dark for any chance of a good shot. He squinted into the darkness and saw

movement. Something spindly and agile moved quickly and silently through the neighbor's yard. Will sprang to his feet and started tiptoeing towards the trees. "Will!" Jonathan half-shouted, grabbing his younger brother by the arm. "We can't go after it."

Will stopped. He knew his brother was right.

Part 06

It was two hours into their shift at the video store and Robyn hadn't spoken one word to Steve. He had spent the afternoon with his stomach in knots, knowing she was furious with him. He tried to think of what he could say to apologize, but everything he came up with sounded weak. He had no excuse for doing what he had done. He had done it out of spite because he was feeling hurt. Now he was feeling wretched.

The only customer of the afternoon exited the shop and they were left alone. Robyn was the first to speak. "My dad won't pay for my college now."

Steve's heart sank. Hurting Robyn's feelings was the least of his betrayal-the damage he had done was real.

"I... I..." he stuttered.

"Steve," she started, then stopped. She closed her eyes to gather her thoughts and fight the impending tears.

The door to the video store opened and in stepped two policemen and a younger man in handcuffs who Robyn and Steve recognized immediately. "Is this the person you sold a videotape to, Woody?" Callahan quietly asked the man in cuffs. Woody nodded, looking at the floor.

"Good afternoon," said Officer Powell as they approached. "This fellow here says he sold you an illegal videotape. Is that true?"

Steve gave Robyn a pleading look. She returned it with a vindictive sneer.

"Robyn..." Steve whispered.

"Yes, Officers," Robyn responded. "I was there when it happened. Steve Harrington purchased an illegal copy of Back to the Future for ten dollars from this man." She gestured at the pathetic-looking bootlegger.

"Alright then," said Officer Powell calmly. "Steve, you're going to have to come with us down to the station. You're under arrest."

"What!?" Steve exclaimed. "There is no way that's an arrestable offence, Officers."

"I'm afraid it is, Mr. Harrington. Please come with us."

Steve's mouth was wide open in disbelief as he found himself being handcuffed by Sean Callahan. Walking toward the squad car, Steve wanted to take a swipe at the bootlegger, but knew he couldn't.

Robyn watched with bitter satisfaction as the squad car rolled out of sight.

Part 07

"Is everything ready for tomorrow?" asked Dustin.

"I think so, you're the one who knows what we need." Mike said.

Max and Lucas stomped down the stairs to the Wheeler's basement. "Bad news guys," said Max. "I can't go with you to Fairfax."

"What? Why?" Dustin sounded genuinely disappointed.

"My dad doesn't want the family apart for Thanksgiving. He's taking us to my Aunt's house and we're having dinner and everything there. I tried to get out of it, but since Billy's been gone, well you know. My dad just wants us all together, whether we want to be or not."

The three boys stared at the floor. They didn't dare protest. Then Lucas spoke, "You guys, I can't go either. Same thing, my dad says he wants us all home for Thanksgiving. My grandparents are coming over and there is no way he's letting me leave for the whole weekend."

"This sucks!" yelled Dustin. You're sending Mike and me to fight the Mind Flayer on our own?"

"There's only one Gorgon Buster anyway," reasoned Max. "I'm not sure I want to see that thing again anyway! One of you is going to wind up dead!"

"You'll have Will and Jonathan and Nancy," said Lucas. He was disappointed that he couldn't have his own Gorgon Buster. He didn't want to make the trip to Fairfax without one. Inwardly he was terrified.

"You guys are just staying here so you can be alone together," accused Mike.

"I wish," muttered Lucas.

"Not even! I have to leave town to go to my Aunt's. I won't even be here."

"Well, it looks like it's just us this time," Dustin turned to Mike. After that comment, the room fell silent.

Part 08

Eleven and Thirteen had been sitting silently for ages when Thirteen finally said, "I want to show you something."

"Okay," Eleven said cautiously. She was still a prisoner at the mercy of her sister.

"But first, you have to wake up."

Eleven jolted awake in the hospital room. She violently sat up and surveyed the room; it only took her a moment to realize where she was. Thirteen stood next to the bed, waiting for Eleven to gather her wits. Eleven moved to get out of bed, but she was held back by wires attaching her head to a nearby machine. She touched her head and felt no hair there. She felt familiar electrodes there and, in disgust, peeled each one off and let them hang from the machine. She gingerly removed the IV needle from her arm and got out of the bed. Her muscles and bones ached-she felt groggy and nauseated.

It was nighttime and the Intensive Care Unit was quiet. Eleven contemplated making a run for it, but in that moment, she saw Thirteen close her eyes and begin to violently shake. Curiosity held Eleven where she stood and she watched the girl convulse.

Thirteen's eyelids snapped open. The beautiful blue of the young girl's eyes was gone and instead, the fullness of her eyes were enrobed with inky black. Eleven stared, transfixed. In the next moment, there was a loud snapping sound as a huge crack began to grow in the wall. It started at the floor and spread its way to the ceiling, branching out to the left and right. The cracks began to pull apart, wider and wider, and a sickeningly familiar red light burned on the other side. Eleven's stomach turned as she watched the gate tear open right in front of her.

Part 09

Ted Wheeler stood in next to his station wagon with his daughter, Nancy. "Now, I don't have to tell you to be careful and look after these youngsters. I'm actually glad you're only taking Mike and Dustin. It's a long drive and teenaged boys can be quite a handful."

"Oh, I know all about teenaged boys, dad," she playfully rolled her eyes at him.

"And while you're gone, I want you to really think about going to college. Working at the police station is fine for now, but you will want to do something more. You're too smart not to," he smiled at her.

"I think I already know what I want to do, dad."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I've given it a lot of thought," she paused, "And I'm going to enroll in the Police Academy as soon as they'll take me." She waited for his response, ready for an argument.

Ted was gobsmacked. His little Nancy wanted to become a policewoman. He knew better than to argue with her so soon after her announcement, he had learned a thing or two over the years.

"Well, Nancy, I think you would make one hell of a policewoman." He gave her a big hug.

"Thanks, dad," she returned the hug, amazed, but grateful, that he hadn't protested right there and then.

"Let's go!" shouted Mike from the front seat.

"Bye, dad," said Nancy, relieved and invigorated that he took her news so well.

"Bye, dad! See you on Sunday," Mike called from the open window.

Ted watched as the station wagon rolled down the driveway and forced himself to imagine he was watching a squad car with Nancy, in uniform, weapon in holster, behind the wheel. Pride filled his heart and he knew right then that he would do anything to help his daughter reach her goal. He whistled a happy little tune as he walked back to the house.

Nancy put the wagon into park in front of the Henderson's place. Dustin was already waiting on the sidewalk for them. He had two suitcases with him.

"We're only going for a few days," Nancy said.

Dustin opened the tailgate of the wagon and deposited his large, very heavy suitcase with a bang. "Oh, this one is books. You know, Dungeons and Dragons," he laughed.

"Let's go!" Mike whined again.

"I'm in, cool your jets, Mike," Dustin buckled his seatbelt in the back seat. Again, Nancy put the station wagon in drive and they started their long journey to Fairfax, none of them knowing exactly what they would find there.

Part 10

The gate gaped open in front of the girls. The swirling lights pulsed and seemed to reach out for her. Eleven felt like she was going to be swallowed whole. Thirteen stood still, eyeballs blackened, face

reflecting the hellish red light from the gate. "I want you to come and meet Cthaeghya. She will be very happy to see you." The irony of Thirteen's statement was not lost on Eleven. "I've been looking for you, like I said. At first, it was a search for a friend, but after you killed Cthaeghya's child, I searched for an enemy."

The drugs in Eleven's system were still at work. Eleven heard everything Thirteen said, but it seemed distorted and she didn't understand. "Come," she prompted.

"No!" she pulled away, but was immediately seized as if hundreds of invisible ropes circled her and tightened until she couldn't even squirm. The unseen force lifted her into the air, Thirteen concentrating on every movement. "We will go and see Cthaeghya now." She stepped across the threshold and Eleven hovered after her helplessly.

Behind them, the gate shrank and closed, leaving them in the quiet darkness of the Upside Down. The invisible grip holding Eleven loosened and she dropped to her feet in the empty hospital of the Upside Down. "Follow me," instructed Thirteen as she pushed her way through the doors and down the hallway. Outside, Eleven could see all the semi-familiar buildings of Fairfax, their silhouettes muted and blanketed in dark clouds. The girls worked their way along the street in search of Cthaeghya. Thirteen led the way looking left and right, up and down for her friend. Eleven looked as well, terrified to meet the vengeful beast. She kept as vigilant as she could under the circumstances, determined to be the first one to spot the Flayer.

In the dim light on the horizon, they saw her. She towered above all the buildings, her spindly legs expertly stepping between them. As she approached, she appeared to shrink, not because of perspective, but because she had truly become smaller. She walked, spider-like, toward the two girls and stopped next to Thirteen. Its mouth opened and inner jaws protruded and stroked Thirteen's cheek. In return, Thirteen patted the Mind Flayer, like one would pet a friendly dog or a horse. Eleven watched, aghast.

The Flayer turned to Eleven and as quick as lightning sprang to her side. The Mind Flayer filled her view, nothing but teeth and a bottomless throat loomed before her. She winced and reeled and fell

to the ground. The Flayer stood over her and hissed and snarled, getting closer and closer to Eleven. "No! You can't, Cthaeghya!" Thirteen commanded.

The Flayer immediately sprang away and into the waiting arms of Thirteen. Eleven was confused as to why she was not destroyed in that moment. Thirteen whispered to it and soothed it like a child and after a brief interval, the Flayer left them both, her giant legs striding away until she was out of sight.

"Time to go back," Thirteen said.

Without question, Eleven picked herself up from the ground and followed her back to the hospital. In the same spot where Thirteen had conjured the gate for their entrance into the Upside Down, she did so again. The gray, morning twilight seeped into the Upside Down and shone on Eleven's coma-blackened face. This time, she did not need any cajoling to cross the threshold. She leaped into the hospital room, Thirteen on her heels. Safely on the other side, the gate receded and closed, leaving no trace of it ever having been there.

"Back into bed," said Thirteen, acidly. As before, the invisible ropes froze Eleven's muscles against her will and lifted her back into the hospital bed. Eleven fought as hard as she could against Thirteen. She tried over and over to use her own psychokinesis, but was overtaken. She watched in terror, unable to move as the IV needle took on a life of its own and inserted itself into the veins of Eleven's paralyzed arm. "Why are you doing this?" Eleven wailed.

"I needed to show you that I can control Cthaeghya, that she will do whatever I ask."

"How are you doing all of this?" Eleven shrieked, panicking as the electrodes moved like snakes toward her and attached themselves to her skull.

"Oh, I'm not doing any of this. You are."

After several hours of waiting, the Christmas lights in the Byers's front room began to flicker. Joyce stared hopefully at the wall. "Hopper, can you hear me?" Joyce spoke loud and clear. 'Yes' illuminated. She jumped in excitement, wringing her hands. She knew in her heart it was Hopper who had made the lights flicker.

"Are you okay?"

'No,' came the reply.

Joyce grimaced at Jim's answer.

The lights of the alphabet began to flash. "C-A-N-T-W-A-L-K-A-N-Y-M-O-R-E," Joyce spoke the letters out loud and wrote them down. "N-O-T-H-I-N-G-T-O-E-A-T," a pause, then, 'N-O-T-M-U-C-H-T-I-M-E.'

"Oh, Hopper! I will get to you, I promise," shouted Joyce as loud as she could, fighting back hot tears.

"I-C-A-N-H-E-A-R-Y-O-U-F-I-N-E." Hopper messaged. Joyce fell to the floor in emotional exasperation, laughing as she wiped tears from her cheeks.

The lights continued to flash and Joyce did her best to keep alert and pay attention. "I-W-A-S-T-E-D-M-Y-L-I-F-E."

"You wasted your life? What do you mean, Jim? That's not true," Joyce consoled in a quieter tone. For a moment, none of the lights flickered. Joyce waited, staring at the wall and holding her breath.

"I-D-I-D-N-T-S-P-E-N-D-I-T-W-I-T-H-Y-O-U."

Joyce's tears flowed freely as she realized what he was saying to her. Her heart ached to the point of exhaustion. She knew she would have to find a way to get to him, no matter what the cost. He was almost out of time.

5. Episode 05 - the forgiven and the flayer

Part 01

Steve's parents were extremely unhappy at having to bail their son out of lockup right before Thanksgiving. To show him how unhappy they were, they left him there for the night. He didn't try to sleep, he just sat on one of the benches and leaned against the wall, thinking. Woody was still there, nobody had bailed him out either. He laid on the bench opposite Steve and stayed quiet until late in the evening.

"Umm, dude, what had you done? That girl was mega pissed at you," Woody said lazily out of boredom.

"You don't wanna know," Steve answered. "I stabbed her in the back and I guess this is her revenge. I deserve it." Steve hung his head. His hair had gone mostly flat from lack of upkeep.

"It must have been some kind of a... uhh... betrayal. I never seen anyone so miffed."

"Yeah, it was." Steve did not want to talk to Woody about it. He was the one that got him into this mess.

"Must be nice, though, you know. Having a friend to look out for you when you're about to do something really stupid. You know, like she did. Nobody tried to talk me out of doing what I did you know. Smart people stay away from me. Ha ha ha." he mused.

"It is nice having a friend like her," Steve admitted. He sat on the hard bench and thought about Robyn and how smart and funny she was. Then he thought about how she had rejected him. He spent the rest of night awake in the dark cell, piecing together his feelings for Robyn and what he was going to do about it, if she ever spoke to him again.

Part 02

The phone rang while Joyce was still sleeping. The noise woke her and she plodded down the hallway to the telephone. "Hello," she

croaked.

"Mrs. Byers? This is Dr. Owens, I'm returning your call." Joyce perked up immediately. She had been waiting weeks for this phone call.

"Dr. Owens, thank you so much for calling me, I've been desperate to speak to you!"

"I am so sorry, I've been out of the country and only just returned today. I received a brief note from our receptionist that Jane is in a coma and you've been blocked of your access. Is this true?" Dr. Owens was genuinely concerned.

"Yes. Long story short, she had passed out several times and then finally didn't wake up. She is in the Fairfax Hospital under the care of a Dr. Svenson," Joyce explained.

"Sorry, Joyce, did you say Dr. Svenson? Dr. Mark Svenson?" Dr. Owens sounded alarmed.

"I didn't catch his first name, I suppose it could be him," Joyce was at a loss.

"Obnoxious, tall, blond guy with dimples and perfect teeth?" he suggested, sounding equal parts disgusted and envious.

"Yes! That's him! Do you know him?"

"Yes, he is a psychiatric expert. He abruptly left a prestigious post at the Indianapolis Psychiatric Hospital a few months ago. I wondered where he would turn up."

"So he is a good doctor?" Joyce started to calm down.

"One of the best," Dr. Owens paused. "Joyce, how were they able to block your access to Jane?"

Joyce relayed the story about how the adoption process was not complete and how she was quietly and unceremoniously served with a Restraining Order preventing her from going anywhere near the hospital to see Jane. Dr. Owens listened intently, asked a few more questions about Jane's health, and then promised he would call Joyce

back in a couple of hours. She thanked him and hung up the phone. Then she waited nervously for his call back.

Part 03

Max sat at the kitchen table with a bowl of cereal getting soggy in front of her. She knew that Nancy, Mike and Dustin had already left for Fairfax earlier that morning and that she was going to be spending the weekend at her Aunt's house with her parents and a bunch of relatives who were basically just strangers. She stared out the window at the autumn fog.

The floorboards down the hallway creaked and Max knew her step-dad was on his way from the bedroom to the kitchen. She turned her attention to the spoiled cereal and didn't look up as he opened the fridge. He poured himself a cup of coffee and Max choked down a spoonful the soggy Cheerios she had been ignoring. He sat across from her at the table and she eventually looked up. His eyes were red and puffy and he looked more forlorn than anyone Max had ever seen.

"Max," he started. He spoke so gently that she was intrigued at what he might say next. "Max, I need to apologize to you," he stared at the table as he spoke.

She put down her spoon and listened. She had never heard him apologize to anyone before. "I loved my son very much. I have a lot of... regrets about... how I treated him," he paused, staring into his coffee cup. "Then it dawned on me that I was treating you exactly the same way that I treated him. That's not the example I want to teach you. That's not the kind of man I want to be. Life is too short to have those regrets. I was wrong to be so angry with you and I'm sorry."

Tears were shining in his eyes as he looked at Max. Her heart melted at the sight of her tough-as-nails step-dad in tears. She knew he missed Billy terribly and all either of them wanted was peace in their home. "I forgive you," she whispered and put her arms around his neck. He began to sob and she squeezed him tight. She looked up and saw her mother with kleenex in hand, tears streaming down her face. Max smiled at her mom and knew that things were going to be much different at her house from then on.

Part 04

Dr. Owens kept his promise to Joyce and telephoned her two and half hours later. "Jane's situation sounded familiar, so I did some digging to make sure I had my facts straight. Some of what I'm going to tell you is confidential, so this conversation never happened," he said, knowing Joyce was no stranger to these types of conversations.

"I understand," agreed Joyce. She was beyond anxious to hear whatever Dr. Owens had discovered.

"So, you remember when the Hawkins National Laboratory was effectively closed and I took over operations? Well, there were two girls like Jane still in the Laboratory at that time. We were able to locate the mother of one of the girls and they were reunited. But the other girl had absolutely no personal records and a severe, unidentified and therefore untreated psychosis. I made the decision to have her transferred to the Indianapolis Psychiatric Hospital under the care of Dr. Svenson. I received regular reports that she was doing well under his treatment, but about four months ago, the girl fell into an unexplained coma and then died. Not long after that, Dr. Svenson left the hospital."

Joyce swallowed and hoped that if she stayed silent, Dr. Owens would give her some good news. "Now, one would assume that these girls both fell into coma because of their treatment at the Hawkins National Laboratory. So I telephoned the mother of the third girl this afternoon. She told me that her daughter is thriving and has had no health issues whatsoever."

"So you're saying that Jane is in danger under the care of Dr. Svenson?" Joyce was becoming rattled.

"Not necessarily. I still need to do some digging. I left a message with the State Adoption Coordinator and am waiting for a call back with respect to your blocked access. I think that will tell us more. Can you hang on until tomorrow? I can understand that this is painfully stressful for you."

"Yes, I can wait. What's one more day," Joyce was becoming frantic. "Thank you Dr. Owens."

"Take care, Joyce," he said warmly.

Joyce hung up the phone, leaned against the hallway wall and heaved a long sigh.

Part 05

The phone rang four times and Max was ready to hang up when she heard a click and Erica's voice on the other end of the line, "Sinclair residence, Erica speaking."

"Hi, Erica, is Lucas there," said Max, rolling her eyes, waiting for Erica to give her a ton of sass.

"One moment, please," Erica said curtly. Max was stunned. Usually when she called Lucas, Erica gave her a five minute lecture on something, but this time there was nothing.

"Hello?" said Lucas.

"Hi Lucas, it's me. What's the deal with your sister? She was super polite to me."

"Oh, that. Yeah, my grandparents are here and she is trying to blind them with good behavior in hopes of getting a reward. Grandpa has a wallet full of cash. I think she's going to do it, actually."

"Well, enjoy it while it lasts," said Max. "So, my parents changed their minds about me going to Fairfax. My Aunt's house is an hour from there and they said if I still wanted to go, you could come with us and they would drop us off. Do you think you can?"

"Oh man!" Lucas exclaimed. "I doubt it, but I'll ask. Now that my grandparents are here, I think I'm stuck. When are you leaving?"

"Dad said we're leaving around two o'clock this afternoon. See if you can. If you can't, I guess I'll just go to my Aunt's with my parents."

"Okay, I'll call you back," and with that, Lucas hung up.

Part 06

Officer Powell unlocked the door to the holding cell. "Harrington, you're up," he said.

Steve got to his feet, anxious to go home. "Good luck, man," said Woody.

"Yeah, you too," Steve said, completely happy to be leaving Woody and the holding cell behind, but he held back. He wondered who was in the Station that morning. He had called his parents after his arrest, they were the only ones that knew where he was. Nancy would be at the front desk to see him in his moment of humiliation. He hesitated until Powell had to gently threaten him to get moving. He hung his head as he rounded the corner to the front desk.

He slowly lifted his face slightly to see who was there. Nancy's receptionist chair was empty, providing him with a small amount of relief from his embarrassment. He raised his head and saw only one person waiting at the front desk. The shame he felt burned red hot on his cheeks. Robyn stood just a few feet from him, looking every bit as miserable as he felt.

"Miss Buckley explained to us that the two of you had a fight and she only implicated you out of spite. That, in itself, is a crime as well. Now, if you two can learn to settle your problems like adults instead of petty children, we won't charge her and you are free to go. Do we have an understanding, Mr. Harrington?" Powell lectured.

"Yes, sir," whispered Steve. Powell stared meaningfully at Robyn, waiting for a response from her as well.

"Yes," said Robyn, eyes downcast.

"You two get out of here. And happy Thanksgiving," he ushered them out the front door and locked it behind them.

Without a word, Robyn flung her arms around Steve and hugged him tight. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I'm sorry too," Steve returned.

"Your hair looks like crap," she teased.

"Is it bad?" he laughed.

"Come on. I think there's some hairspray in my car."

Part 07

Max and her parents pulled up in front of the Sinclair house. Max was giddy with excitement now that she and Lucas would be joining their friends in Fairfax. Max watched as Lucas appeared from the doorway with his mother close on his heels. She hugged him and held his face in her hands. He was clearly embarrassed that she was treating him like a child in front of his girlfriend. Erica stuck her head out the door and said something to her mother who then gave Lucas one last hug and disappeared into the house. He ambled down the front steps to the car with his backpack over his shoulder.

Erica appeared from the doorway again, this time carrying a suitcase. *Oh, great*, thought Max, *Erica is coming with us?* Max got out of the car to put a stop to any such arrangement.

"Lucas," Erica called. "Wait a second!"

Lucas turned around to face his sister, Max at his side. "What Erica? You're not coming with us." Seeing the suitcase in her hand, he assumed the same thing Max had.

"You dumbass, I don't want to come with you! Nobody in their right mind would want to go with you."

"Then what do you want?" Max asked, irritated.

"You need to take this with you," she set the suitcase down.

"What is it?" they asked in unison.

"Something you and your genius think-tank should have thought of ages ago. You owe me eighty bucks," Erica sounded extremely self-satisfied. "Well, twenty bucks each."

"What?!" Lucas exclaimed and opened the suitcase. Inside were four pairs of neatly folded water-resistant coveralls and what looked like a smaller version of Dustin's Gorgon Buster. It only had one canister

and was clearly operated by a hand pump.

"It's the neutralizer to Dustin's chemicals," Erica explained. "You're ugly enough, I don't need you coming home covered in oozing blisters from chemical burns."

Max and Lucas were stunned. Lucas offered reluctantly, "I'm impressed, Erica. This is actually fantastic!"

"Thank you!" added Max. "You're totally right. These meatheads should have thought of this already. Thank you!"

"Don't mention it," she said. "I just hope y'all get back in one piece so you can pay me back for this. Now get out of here!"

Lucas snapped the suitcase shut and he and Max piled into the backseat of the waiting vehicle. "How did you convince your parents to let you come with us?" Max asked.

"I didn't, Erica did. She hounded my dad until he finally said yes. She gave him a thousand reasons why Thanksgiving would be better without me, including that there would be more apple pie for the rest of them. I don't know how it worked."

"Well, she certainly is very clever. She is definitely concerned about you. I never would have thought to pack that suitcase!" said Max enthusiastically.

"Me neither. I guess she's not so bad after all."

Part 08

The Wheelers' station wagon pulled up in front of the Byers's old, rented house. The front door immediately swung open and Will vaulted down the veranda steps to the wagon. "You're here!" he shouted exuberantly. The doors to the wagon opened and out stepped Mike and Dustin. The three friends embraced. Will was overtaken by emotion. He had been lonely for his friends and seeing them brought tears to his eyes. "Where are Lucas and Max?"

"They couldn't come. Sorry, Will." explained Mike.

"That's okay, at least you guys are here. I missed you!"

"The cavalry is here!" Jonathan shouted from the veranda. He swung himself around the railings and down the steps to the driver's side of the car. Nancy had just extracted herself from the vehicle, tired and bleary-eyed from the long drive. Jonathan stood in front of her, grinning at the sight of her. He took her in his arms and kissed her, she flung her arms around his neck and returned the kiss. "I missed you so much," he whispered.

"I missed you too," she returned, smiling. He took her hand and kissed it. They remained locked in a warm stare while the boys started unloading the large suitcase from the back of the wagon. "Guys, we have a situation," announced Will. "We need a briefing to get ready for tonight," he was deadly serious.

"The Mind Flayer?" asked Dustin. Will nodded confirmation. "We'll be ready," he said confidently.

Inside the old house, Mike, Dustin and Nancy observed the alphabet on the front room wall. "What's this for?" asked Nancy with a laugh. "New holiday tradition?"

Jonathan regarded her seriously. "Hopper is alive."

"Are you sure?" she said, "That is tremendous! But how do you know?"

"He's lost in the Upside Down," explained Will. Dustin unlatched the large suitcase in the middle of the room revealing the Gorgon Buster. It was full of active chemicals and ready to go.

"What's that?" Nancy asked. "You said that case was full of books."

Then the briefing began. Will and Jonathan explained that they had actually seen the Mind Flayer, which meant that a gate to the Upside Down had been opened somewhere. Will gave the update on El's situation at the hospital, which sadly hadn't changed for almost two weeks. Dustin explained to everyone how the Gorgon Buster was supposed to work and for everyone to steer clear of the chemicals it would project. Jonathan relayed Hopper's situation, as he knew it,

emphasizing that Hopper couldn't survive much longer in the Upside Down.

"This is a rescue mission, people," said Dustin confidently. "The plan is to head to the other side of town and locate the gate. Then we search the Upside Down to find Hopper, blasting anything that comes at us with the Gorgon Buster."

"That sounds like the first phase, yeah," said Jonathan.

"We still have to close the gate," said Nancy. She had quickly picked up the severity of the situation.

"But we need El to close the gate, no one else can do it," said Will. He paused. "Do you think she opened it in the first place?"

"I suppose it's possible," supplied Mike. The group was quiet as they considered the dire situation of their absent friend.

"We better get going before it gets dark," instructed Nancy. "Is that thing ready to go?"

"Ready and able!" Dustin said proudly.

The five of them piled into Jonathan's Galaxie and sped away in the direction of Morris and Delores's house.

Part 09

Eleven woke to the familiar scent of ozone. Without even looking around, she knew she was trapped again in the darkness of this place with no way out. She swore and clenched her fists. She had to find a way out, no matter what the cost. Her face burned with rage. She had never felt so helpless in her entire life.

Far in the distance, Eleven heard approaching footsteps again. Thirteen appeared looking tired and angry. Eleven had given up on feeling any sort of sympathy for the girl, even if she was just a child. Eleven was ready to overtake her by force if she was not released. She was not going to wait any longer.

"Why did you say that I am the one who is opening and closing the

gate?" Eleven demanded.

"I said it because you are truly the only one who can. The Russians were successful to a degree, but do you really think they were looking for what you call the Upside Down? No, they were looking for this place: a flawless tool to spy on anyone in the world. They got a hold of the wrong information from the Laboratory and started drilling that precarious hole into Cthaeghya's world. This is the place they were searching for," she gestured to their non-existent surroundings. "Even if they found this place, they would be missing the key to it. You. You are also the only one who can navigate this place."

"Then how are you here?" Eleven asked naively.

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" she sneered, "The reason the scientists had so little interest in me at the laboratory was because they didn't know exactly what I could do. I didn't even discover my own abilities until shortly before the Laboratory was shut down. To put it plainly, big sister, I can remove your or anyone else's powers and use them for myself. Only I am stronger than you, so I wield your powers better than you do."

Eleven gawked at Thirteen who proudly continued her speech.

"The first thing I took from you was your ability to open and close the gate. When you closed it, I could not reach my Cthaeghya, so I opened the gate myself and have been doing so ever since. The next thing of yours I took was your psychokinesis. Did you think you just lost it arbitrarily? The reason you didn't have it was because I did. The last thing I took was your ability to get to this place. That was a lot harder to do for some reason. We had to drug you to keep you from resisting. By the way, everyone thinks you are in a coma."

"A coma?" Eleven was dumbfounded.

"Did you know that the longer a person is in a coma, the less chance they have of waking up? My plan is to keep you in a coma until the Doctor can say that you died. Once everyone believes it, you will come with us."

"With you where?" Eleven was becoming more and more terrified by the moment.

"Away from here. Anywhere in the world! Anywhere in Cthaeghya's world! They're not going to lock me away in a tiny room ever again!"

"Why do you need me? Why won't you leave me alone?"

"Eleven," Thirteen addressed her by name for the first time. "You still don't understand. I need your powers, therefore I need you. Otherwise, I can't get to Cthaeghya. Neither of us can live in the other's world for very long at one time. I need access to a gate at all times. Having your powers will also ensure that nobody can ever imprison us again."

"But you're imprisoning me now. You're gaining your freedom at my expense." Eleven stared at her feet. She was starting to think that she would never be able to get away from Thirteen.

"And what are you doing with your freedom? Going to the mall?" she responded caustically.

"I have a family. And friends," Eleven supplied.

"Hmm... And where are they now? You've been in the hospital this whole time and they have never once come to see you. I've been at your side almost the whole time and I haven't seen anyone."

Eleven considered the possibility that Joyce and Will had been happy to get rid of her. There was a time when she believed she was a burden on the Byers family. Then she remembered all the times Joyce had held her in a motherly embrace. She remembered every one of Will's shy smiles. She had definitely felt loved.

"They will come for me. And then you'll be sorry." Eleven said through gritted teeth.

Part 10

It was just before sundown when the Gorgon Busters arrived at Morris and Delores's house. Jonathan, Nancy, Mike, Will and Dustin streamed out of the car like military troops. Dustin heaved the

Gorgon Buster onto his shoulders, getting ready for action. The five kids from Hawkins marched down Morris's driveway where he spotted them from the kitchen window.

"Hey!" he shouted from the back door. "Is there something you should be telling me?"

"We have to find the gate," Jonathan replied. "We need to find where this thing is getting in and out. If we're not back in three hours, send a search party!"

They trudged across the backyard and into the trees. "Spread out and check every tree," Nancy instructed. "It shouldn't be too far away from the houses."

The five of them fanned out and began searching for the gate in the fading daylight. Twenty minutes passed and they had found nothing. "How will we know it when we see it?" Dustin asked.

"Don't worry, you'll know." Nancy said firmly.

Will put his hand to the back of his head. His skin was bristling and the hair on his arms stood on end. "You guys! It's around here somewhere. I can feel it!" he warned.

"Someone switch me on!" called Dustin. Mike sprinted to him and flicked the switch on the Gorgon Buster. The pump began to hum as the pressure built.

"Keep an eye!" shouted Jonathan. All five of them scanned the trees, their heads turning frantically to spot the beast. A faint rustle of leaves could be heard, but not much else. The smell of dry, dead leaves floated past them on the breeze.

The forest was getting darker by the moment as everyone stood still, waiting. There was another swishing of leaves and the primed pump of Dustin's Gorgon Buster hummed quietly. Suddenly, a mass of black vapor rushed through the air towards them at terrific speed. "There it is!" screamed Will.

Dustin wasted no time and pulled the trigger to the Gorgon Buster. Yellow foam immediately burst from the weapon and sprayed

directly into the black mass. He smiled seeing his direct hit and followed the Mind Flayer with the stream, keeping his finger on the trigger. "What the hell?" Dustin muttered as it became obvious that the foam wasn't having any effect. The stream just passed through the Mind Flayer and splashed all over the trees in the distance. Mike and Will had thrown themselves to the ground to avoid being drenched with the caustic foam. Dustin let go of the trigger to stop the stream. Mike gave him a apologetic glance from where he laid in the fallen leaves. Nancy and Jonathan were already in pursuit of the Mind Flayer, running as fast as they could. The boys regrouped and followed, past the piles of yellow foam steaming with heat.

In the growing darkness, Nancy could see a tree ahead of her glowing menacingly red. Jonathan spotted it too and they quickened their pace. The Mind Flayer stayed well ahead of them, flying like vapor through the air, winding itself in between the trees to stay ahead. It reached the gate first and disappeared inside. Nancy was preparing to dive in after it when suddenly, as if a switch had been flipped, the gate disappeared and left nothing behind.

Part 11

The Big Apple had finally closed after the frantic Wednesday before Thanksgiving. Joyce was grateful to finally be off her feet and for the silence of her dining room. She knew that Nancy and Will's friends were supposed to be at her house, but no one was at home. She knew they had been talking a lot about the Mind Flayer, but she couldn't handle asking questions or getting involved. The thought of El locked away at the hospital and Hopper trapped in the Upside Down was consuming her mind almost every minute of every day. Joyce couldn't think of anything or anyone else and was almost at her wits' end.

The telephone rang and she answered with an exhausted, "Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Byers, this is Dr. Owens," the voice on the line said.

"Yes, Dr. Owens?" She was surprised to hear from him. That morning, he had told her he would call again the next day.

"I know it's a bit late to be calling, but I uncovered some information

I thought I should share immediately. The Adoption Co-ordinator's office finally got back to me about the Order to block your access to Jane. It turns out that no one at their office made the application. So I pulled some strings at the courthouse to get a copy of the application for the Order. It turns out it was filed by Dr. Svenson himself."

"You mean that he's the one who is keeping me from Jane? Not the State?"

"Basically, yes." Dr. Owen paused. "Mrs. Byers, I have to confess I'm quite concerned about Jane considering the circumstances surrounding the other girl's coma and death. It may be possible that Dr. Svenson... How do I put this? That he discovered exactly why the girls were being studied at the National Laboratory. And he has a direct interest in Jane because of it."

"I think I agree with you Dr. Owens." Joyce set her jaw tight to contain her rage. "There has been something wrong with this whole thing from the beginning and I'm not going to let them push me around any more."

"Since tomorrow is Thanksgiving, government offices won't be open until Monday. Do you what you need to do, Joyce. You have my support one hundred percent, medically and legally." he sounded furtive and sincere.

"Thank you, Dr. Owens, I truly appreciate everything you've done."

"You're welcome. Good bye, Joyce."

"Good night," she replied with a heavy sigh.

Just as she hung up the phone, the front door opened and five sweaty, bedraggled teenagers entered. Joyce reached for her jacket. "Mom, where are you going?" asked Jonathan as she brushed past him.

Her eyebrows were drawn together and her eyes were shining with fury. "I'm going to get my little girl!" she announced as she retreated out the front door.

Jonathan had understood the expression on her face and knew immediately what she intended to do. He turned to Will, Mike and Dustin, "You guys, stay here. Nancy, come on!"

6. Episode 06 - the rescued and the runaway

Part 01

It was closing in on midnight and the hospital was quiet. The skeleton staff that remained on duty was less diligent than usual because of the looming holiday. Joyce led Jonathan and Nancy to the Intensive Care Unit where El's room was. It was easy for them to make their way along the corridors without being seen. The Unit Desk was empty and no staff roamed the hallways. The lights had been dimmed for nighttime and only a few faint voices could be heard in distant rooms. The three of them quickly and quietly tiptoed to the room at the end of the hallway and noiselessly pushed open the door.

Joyce approached the bed and regarded El's appearance. Her hair had been shaved off and electrode wires streamed from her head like some sort of science fair substitute. "Oh, El!" she whispered in dismay. She tried to not be overtaken by emotion in that moment. They needed to be smart and quick. "Watch the hallway," Joyce instructed Nancy.

Jonathan began removing the sticky electrode pads from El's head and Joyce started to work on removing the IV needle. Once they had her free, Jonathan gently picked her up and held her in his arms, ready to make the silent trek out of the maze of hospital corridors.

"Where do you think you're taking her?" an unfamiliar voice asked from a dark corner of the room.

"Where did she come from?" Nancy exclaimed as no one had entered the room.

The young girl Joyce had seen before in El's room was standing in the corner. Her hair was in a wild mess about her shoulders and her eyes reflected nothing, only hollow black.

Joyce was frightened at the girl's appearance, but knew that she could not be dissuaded from her intentions. Jonathan stared incredulously at the girl, El growing heavier and heavier in his arms.

"We're taking my daughter home, where she belongs," Joyce told the girl.

Nancy pushed open the door to leave and as soon as Jonathan took one step towards it, El was wrenched from his arms. She floated above their heads, out of reach, held by nothing that could be seen.

"My sister is staying here with me. Now LEAVE!" she commanded angrily.

Nancy made the first move toward the girl. She lunged toward her and grabbed her around her middle, trapping her arms. Nancy was flung away and into the wall. Jonathan was the next to try to subdue the girl. He too was invisibly held back and pinned against another wall. Joyce stood, stunned. *Is this the girl Dr. Owens said had died under Dr. Svenson's care? she wondered. Is this the same girl who had no parents, that no one came to claim? That has spent the majority of her life in laboratories and hospitals?*

Still hovering above the scene was El, her hospital gown flowing beneath her, unconscious and oblivious. Joyce spared a glance at her and knew she had to do whatever it would take to get her home and away from Dr. Svenson. *Doesn't this girl deserve rescuing too?* her conscience questioned. She started to form a plan.

"If El is my daughter, then you are too," she said softly to the girl. "You can come and live with us. We will be a family. What is your name?"

"I already have a family," she retorted hotly. "And El, as you call her, is coming with us. She doesn't belong with you, she belongs with us. Now leave before I have to hurt you."

Joyce gave Jonathan a pleading glance. He stared helplessly at her from where he was pinned against the wall. Nancy struggled against her intangible bonds.

Joyce took striding steps toward the girl who was startled at her action and backed away. Joyce was able to get nose to nose with her without being forced back. She grabbed the girls arms and shook her, staring into the deep blackness of her ghostly eyes. The girl tried to

pull away, but Joyce would not let go. Nancy and Jonathan watched as El was dropped from the ceiling to the bed. She landed with a soft crash and a bounce. Thirteen was immediately able to restrain Joyce, stuck in a low crouch, arms outstretched.

"I knew they wouldn't leave us alone, and now I can see that you aren't going to leave us alone either," the girl spoke as she moved away from Joyce. "I didn't want to have to do this, but I am going to have to kill you," she spat menacingly in Nancy's face.

As she turned around to view her captives, one part of the scene was not as she had expected it. Eleven was sitting upright on the bed, eyes burning with disgust and anger. Joyce toppled to the floor in her awkward position and Jonathan and Nancy suddenly were no longer motionless against the walls. Without a word, El stretched out her hand and before anyone could do or say anything, Thirteen was lifted into the air and smashed violently against the wall. She landed in a crumpled heap beneath the window and did not stir.

"El!" Joyce exclaimed and collected her in her arms. Tears streamed freely from El's eyes as she held tightly to her mother.

Nancy and Jonathan joined the embrace, but it was short-lived. "We have to get out of here," Nancy warned, and the four of them left the room and Thirteen, unmoving, behind them.

Part 02

The Harrington family Thanksgiving dinner was over. Everyone was full beyond reason and Mr. Harrington had retired to the family room to watch the football game. Mrs. Harrington, still disappointed in her son, retreated to the kitchen to tackle the mountain of dirty dishes and to sulk.

Robyn and Steve were left alone at the dining room table where they chatted quietly about how disgusting Robyn thought marshmallows were baked onto sweet potatoes. "Hey, do you want to go for a walk? I want to get out of here," Steve said.

"Sure. One night of incarceration and you're just itching for freedom, huh?" she teased.

Outside, the sun was trying to peek out between the fluffy clouds. It was a bit windy, but the two of them walked down the street without complaint. They reached the playground at the end of the street and sat on the merry-go-round, Robyn pushing them slowly in a circle.

"Robyn, there's something I wanted to ask you," Steve started.

"Oh no, here we go," moaned Robyn.

"Well, if what I have to say isn't important to you then I guess I'll just shut up," he threatened.

"No, go on. You know I just like busting your chops."

"The thing is," he started. "I feel absolutely terrible about what I did to you. I had no idea that your dad would react the way he did. I guess I kinda thought that deep down, your parents would know that about you. To be honest, I said what I said out of spite. After you turned me down and Nancy turned me down, again, I was just feeling rejected and miserable. I thought I would somehow feel better if you were miserable too, but it was the opposite."

"You've already apologized," Robyn reminded him.

"I know, but I wanted to say more than an apology. It's more like a proposal of sorts."

Robyn gave him an exaggerated frown and he quickly continued, "I know you'll never like me in 'that way', and I will never expect you to. But you and I are best friends and I never want to lose you as my friend. Since I am the reason your dad won't pay for your college, my proposal is this: Will you let me live with you and pay for your college? I promise to take care of you every step of the way until you've graduated. If you let me,, I feel I will have somehow made up for hurting you."

Robyn was dumbstruck, so she silently considered his proposal. She knew there was no way he would be able to keep that kind of promise, but his sentiment was moving. Now that she was out of the closet, her parents had been treating her differently. They felt disconnected from her, distant and uncaring. Home was no longer a

pleasant place to be. Working at the video store certainly wasn't enough to keep her in Hawkins. She had received numerous acceptance letters that week from some of the colleges to which she had applied. She looked at Steve and his beautiful hair, he was waiting for her to say something, anything. She knew he was just a boy, but he was a boy trying to do the right thing.

She smiled at him and her heart felt at peace with her decision. "When do you want to leave? I would never expect you to pay for my college, but come on, let's get out of here!"

"I'd choose you over Hawkins any day of the week," he chuckled, relieved. He put his arm around her neck and kissed the top of her head as the merry-go-round made another circle.

Part 03

At the Byers's house, Will, Dustin and Mike were discussing the changes they needed to make to Hopper's rescue plan. "I still don't understand why the Gorgon Buster didn't work," he held his head in his hands and was dangerously close to tears.

"Don't feel bad," Will said, trying to console his friend. "We don't know a lot about the Flayer, but from what I've experienced, and what we've seen, I'm pretty sure it has to possess someone in order to have a physical mass. You saw it, it was almost like something out of Star Trek."

"So you're saying the Gorgon Buster is only good for de-possessing people? And it's going to burn the hell out of them in the process?" Mike asked.

Will looked at his shoes. "Not exactly," he started, but was interrupted by the sound of a car engine and the flash of headlights in the driveway.

Someone knocked at the door. Puzzled, Will stood and walked over to open the door. "Hey!" Max and Lucas chorused.

"You came!" Will was ecstatic to see them. Max waved at her parents in the car, they waved back and pulled out of the driveway and away

from the house.

All smiles, Max and Lucas entered the house and dropped their bags on the floor. One look at Dustin and Mike and they knew something was wrong. "What's up?" asked Lucas. "Is everything okay?"

Mike excitedly told them about how Hopper was still alive and in the Upside Down and how they had attempted a rescue mission. Dustin relayed the entire experience of finding the Flayer and the gate. He explained how the Gorgon Buster hadn't worked the way he had hoped. Will capped off Dustin's story by explaining that his mom, brother and Nancy had gone to the hospital to somehow bring El home.

"Whoa," breathed Lucas after hearing their stories. "This is way heavier than I thought it was going to be!"

"As I was saying earlier," Will directed his comments toward Dustin, "I don't think the Gorgon Buster is only good for de-possessing people. That might be all it's good for here, but in the Upside Down, I think there's a completely different set of rules."

"You mean..." Mike started.

"The Mind Flayer is from the Upside Down and it looks and acts much differently there than it does on this side of the gate. I think all we need to do is find the gate again, get inside, and then if it gets in between us and Hopper, we will actually have a weapon against it."

"But I thought we were going to kill it!" Dustin protested.

"Our number one concern is getting Hopper out of the Upside Down in one piece. If that means killing the Flayer, then so be it. But I don't think it's wise to go picking a fight."

Everyone nodded in agreement. "Speaking of this glorious rescue operation you are planning and the impending use of the Gorgon Buster, feast your eyes on this!" Max proudly popped open the suitcase Erica had supplied and turned it so its contents could be seen.

"What is it?" asked Dustin.

"Erica gave it to us. It's four water-proof coveralls and the neutralizing chemicals for the Gorgon Buster. You know, in case any of us accidentally get a shot of it."

Dustin looked even more miserable than he had when he thought his invention was useless. He knew Erica was clever and he should have listened to her. Now he was looking like a fool for not taking everyone's safety into consideration.

"But there are five of us," said Mike, looking hopelessly into the suitcase at the coveralls.

The front door opened and everyone but Mike and Dustin looked up. "You mean six!" called Max excitedly as she sprang to her feet.

Eleven appeared at the doorway, her hospital gown drooped around her and a relieved smile twitched on her lips as she realized that every single one of her friends was there in front of her. Everyone was on their feet and crowding around her. Hugs and kisses and whispers were exchanged between El and her best friends. Eventually Mike got a hold of her and wouldn't let go. She hugged him fiercely back, squeezing the tears from his eyes.

"Your hair," Max started.

El shyly put a hand to her bare scalp and looked at Max sadly.

"I've always liked her hair better like that anyway," said Mike. "Are you okay?"

She smiled at him, but was too overcome by emotion to speak. She didn't have to speak, there was more for her to learn that would take her breath away. Joyce pulled El into a hug and said, "We've got some news for you. I know you're tired and sick, but you need to know that Hopper is alive."

El's knees gave out from under her and she collapsed to the floor. Joyce had to continue, "He is trapped in the Upside Down and if we don't get to him soon, he is going to die."

El heaved several heavy sighs from where she sat on the floor and finally found her strength and her voice, "Then we have to get to him

right now."

"We're ready to go, but shouldn't you stay here?" Mike said.

Everyone looked at each other, no one felt like they were ready to run headfirst into the Upside Down and have a tangle with the Mind Flayer.

"I can't stay here because of her," El was adamant.

"She's right," Joyce whispered.

"But... you... can't..." Mike protested.

Eleven gave a wicked little smile and behind them, all the suitcases and backpacks on the floor rose into the air and flew up the stairs with a small crash into one of the bedrooms. A small, almost imperceptible trickle of blood escaped El's nose.

"NO WAY!" the boys shouted with astonishment, grabbing each other and shaking.

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Max. "Who is 'she'? Who are you talking about?"

Part 04

Of the nine people in Fairfax who were originally from Hawkins, four were in Jonathan's Ford Galaxie, and the remaining five were in the Wheeler family station wagon. They were headed to Morris and Delores's house, yet again, on the other side of town.

Dustin and Lucas were dressed in their waterproof coveralls and had Erica's device between them on the backseat of the station wagon. "You have to use the hand pump to build up the pressure, otherwise it won't work," instructed Dustin.

"I know! Back off, we have to have this thing ready," replied Lucas, irritated. If he wasn't going to get to use the Gorgon Buster, he was going to get to use his sister's invention and no one was going to boss him around about it.

"Those hand pumps will only give you about three feet of range, so you have to be right on the person if they get hit," continued Dustin.

"Then make sure you don't hit anyone," Lucas answered, deadly serious.

"Calm down, you guys," said Max, also dressed in one of the coveralls. "Everything is going to be fine." she said to convince herself, more than to convince the others.

Mike gave a worried look to his fellow Gorgon Busters in the back seat.

Both vehicles pulled up to Morris and Delores's house. All the windows were dark, it was after midnight.

"Everyone keep quiet," instructed Jonathan.

Eleven and Joyce followed Dustin and Mike away from the vehicles. They knew which way they should go to start their search for the gate. Nancy hung back and retrieved a long case from the back of the station wagon. Jonathan watched over her shoulder as she produced a shotgun from the case. She filled her messenger bag with shells and held the yellow-barrelled gun under her arm. "What do we need that for?" Jonathan exclaimed.

"We just do. Don't worry about it," Nancy replied with a smile. Jonathan did not question her further. He knew she could handle a firearm well.

They silently followed the rest of the group into Morris's backyard, past the hedge and into the trees. Nine flashlights scanned the woods back and forth. "Will, how are you feeling?" Joyce asked her son.

"So far, so good," came his reply.

El scanned the woods with her flashlight, looking for the subtlest sign of a gate. Occasionally she tested her psychokinesis to ensure she still could call on it. She had lifted a far away rock and set it back down when the light of her flashlight illuminated the figure of a man. Everyone stopped.

A tall, blonde man dressed in a pastel button down and khaki pants was walking towards them. El didn't recognize him, but Joyce and Will did. "Going for a little hike with your troop of boy scouts, Mrs. Byers?" asked Dr. Svenson in an icy tone.

"We were just looking for you, Dr. Svenson," she answered.

All nine flashlights were on him, but he did not squint or blink in the harsh light. "I see our patient made a miraculous recovery," he gestured toward El, his perfectly symmetrical eyebrows drawn together. He took a step toward her. Her reflexes moved her backwards away from him.

Suddenly, his stare was on Will. "It's you again," he said with a sneer. The skin on Will's arms prickled and he understood who the doctor really was.

"Guys," he called. "It's him!"

"What do you mean?" Dustin hesitated.

"It's the Flayer!" shouted Will.

In the shaky light of the flashlights, they could see Dr. Svenson, stretch and sneer, black vein-like tendrils latticed the skin on his neck.

Dustin finally understood and let loose a heavy stream of foamy chemicals on the man. He immediately turned to run, but only got a few steps before a loud bang announced that Nancy's shotgun had pelted him in the back, knocking him to the ground. He began screaming as the chemicals burnt through his clothes and into his skin. The group advanced on him as he laid on the forest floor, writhing in agony, his face contorted by the presence of the Flayer within his flesh. Dustin cut the stream of the Gorgon Buster and looked on, mortified. Out with the screams came a dark vapor Jonathan immediately recognized and the others understood.

"Neutralizer! Now!" screamed Dustin, desperate for his victim to obtain some relief. Lucas quickly doused the prostrate man with the contents of his canister. Max worked vigorously on the pump to keep

the pressure high in the canister.

"Quick! Follow it!" Jonathan yelled as he, Nancy, Joyce, Mike and Eleven trampled after it as quickly as they could in the darkness of the forest. Almost immediately, they lost sight of the sinister black cloud in the branches of the trees. It was impossible to see anything in the absence of daylight.

Off to the left, Nancy caught a glimpse of a faint red light. "The gate!" she hollered and stamped off towards it. The others simply followed her without question, but as they travelled further, the gate became visible, glowing and pulsing like a beacon in the darkness. The gate had been torn in the side of a large boulder. A rocky area surrounded the boulder and they had to step carefully among the jagged rocks to reach it.

Shotgun in hand, Nancy was the first to go in. "Wait!" cautioned El. "If we go in, we might not be able to ever get back out."

Nancy had already disappeared through the portal and the four that remained could only stand and stare at each other undecided, trying to catch their breath. "I'm willing to take that chance," said Jonathan as he confidently stepped through the gate.

"Me too. We have to get to Hopper," Joyce added as she followed.

Eleven looked at Mike, his face pale and terrified in the battery-powered light. "I have to go," she said.

"Then I'm coming with you," he said quietly.

She took his hand and, together, they stepped through the gate into the Upside Down.

Part 05

The bluish darkness was all around them. The Upside Down was as quiet as a crypt. As they exited the forest, the houses along the street were barely recognizable in the sparkling haze. It was difficult for them to tell exactly where they were.

Mike held on tight to Eleven's hand. He regarded her face, the black

circles under her eyes made her look quite menacing in the absence of her pretty hair. He knew she was tough, much tougher than he was. He admired her greatly for her fearlessness. He wanted to know more about Thirteen, other than what she had told everyone back at Byers's house.

He whispered, "So she just takes away your powers and then you can't use them?"

"Yes," she answered in hushed tones. "At first I didn't know what was going on. But after Joyce and Jonathan woke me up in the hospital, I knew that her presence in my mind somehow felt different. I could tell she was there when I couldn't before."

"Is she there now?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so," she answered as they walked along.

"Where could he be?" Jonathan wondered aloud.

"He said he was near our house, that's a long way. We have to hurry. I haven't heard anything from him since early yesterday." The fear in Joyce's voice was audible.

They quickened their pace and Mike wondered whether the Flayer had reached the Upside Down before them, or after them. He kept looking behind him, nervous to see the large, terrifying creature behind them.

Nancy had no trouble navigating the Upside Down, even with the indiscernible buildings as landmarks. Jonathan caught up to her as she led the group. Something besides rescuing Hopper was on his mind and he felt that he shouldn't waste any time to talk to her about it. "So you shot that doctor? Just without hesitation. Bang! Dead!"

He did not know what Nancy's response would be to his accusation. Surprisingly, she turned to him with an easy smile. "Yeah, I totally shot that guy," she said sarcastically. "It's a beanbag gun, silly. All it does is slow people down, maybe knock the wind out of them. It hurts, sure, but it doesn't kill. Now come on!"

Relief washed over Jonathan and he had newfound respect for his

girlfriend. She was truly wise and not at all mean-spirited. Jonathan caught a look at a small, knowing smile from his mother.

They finally reached the gravel road that led to their house. They hurried down the driveway lightly. No perspiration or weak limbs slowed them down. The house came into view. In the Upside Down the Byers's house seemed larger and grander than it did in the real world. It looked glorious, like it belonged there. The unkempt siding and missing shingles glittered in the dimness. Sparking lights shone through the windows casting a warmth that was otherwise absent in the Upside Down.

Joyce was the first one up the stairs to the veranda. She pushed the front door open and a magnificent wash of light swept into the yard where Eleven, Mike, Nancy and Jonathan stood.

They followed her into the house. Every light in the house was on and glittering. The Christmas lights on the wall appeared to be tripled up and the colorful alphabet twinkled and sparkled. Reflections danced and flickered across the ceilings and walls, as if the house were full of chandeliers. They all gawked at the brightness and beauty of the front room, trying to take it all in from every angle.

After slowly stepping in a small circle, the tour of the lightshow ended by the sight in the large armchair.

Under the beautiful lights in the armchair was Hopper, unconscious. On his knee was Thirteen.

Part 06

Both Eleven and Joyce gasped at the sight of Hopper. He still wore the Russian uniform he had used as a disguise several months earlier. His face was sunken and thin from malnutrition, white from lack of sunlight. He looked small and weak in the oversized uniform. Eleven took an instinctual step toward him. "Stop!" commanded Thirteen.

Eleven stopped in her tracks and raised her hand to forcibly move Thirteen from where she sat when she was suddenly overtaken by a severe pain in her head. Her hands clutched either side of her skull and, weakened, dropped to her knees. Joyce and Mike rushed to her

side. Her eyes were clenched shut and was unable to speak.

Nancy glanced back and forth between Eleven and Thirteen, her shotgun aimed directly at the occupants of the armchair. She wanted to fire directly at the young girl, but hesitated. She didn't know if she could shoot a young girl, even if it was only with a beanbag. She surveyed the situation, waiting for any sign or instruction on how to proceed.

"Now you can see who is smarter and stronger. I have always been the best one," she spoke down to Eleven. She changed her position in the armchair so she was draped across Hopper's lap, legs over one arm, back resting on the other.

"Now you want to save this man and I want to let you," she paused and then sat straight up. "But I want something in return. Eleven must come with me now, or I'll kill him."

"No deal!" shrieked Mike.

Thirteen waved her hand and with a flick of her wrist, Mike was sent skidding across the carpet and into the far wall. He sat, unable to move, held by the force Thirteen had taken from Eleven.

Nancy was finished second-guessing herself. She gritted her teeth and perfected her aim on the girl. Jonathan saw her subtle movement and covered his ears. The shot fired.

The beanbag struck her directly in the chest. The force of the blow sent her backwards; the back of her head hit Hopper squarely in the face.

The pain in Eleven's head immediately subsided and she got to her feet. "We have to keep her unconscious," Eleven breathed.

Just then, Hopper groaned, blood trickled from his nose. Joyce and Eleven were immediately at his side. Mike got up from the far side of the room and joined them. Jonathan gently lifted Thirteen from his lap. "Jim?" Joyce coaxed, his eyes were still closed, she took his hand. "Jim, I'm here. We're here to take you home." Her voice cracked with emotion and at the sound of her words, he slowly blinked his eyes

open.

A relieved smile spread across his dry lips and he closed his eyes again. "You made it," he started.

Eleven stroked his bearded face. "We're here," she whispered as tears formed in her eyes.

A bottle of water was produced from Nancy's messenger bag and it was passed to Hopper who drank as much as he could. Eleven assisted him without taking her eyes off of him for even one second.

"We have to get him out of here, right now." Jonathan sounded panicked. He held Thirteen in his arms and was clearly unsure of what to do with her.

Eleven looked apologetically at the group, then turned back to her dad. "I'm sorry, I was distracted when I saw him. I let her get into my head. But I won't again."

She walked toward the kitchen and stretched out her hand. She closed her eyes and as soon as she did, a crack appeared in the wall. It climbed to the ceiling, pulsed, then split wide open, revealing the unlit kitchen of the Byers's house on the other side.

An ear-splitting screech tore through the air louder than anything any one of them had ever heard. The newly-made gate snapped shut as three windows were smashed in. Large, gangly, tentacle-type legs reached inside the house trying to grab anything they could. Nancy and Eleven bolted from the house, Mike following quickly. The Mind Flayer loomed over the house, its giant jaw gaping open at them from above. Joyce helped Hopper to his feet and they stumbled out of the house, away from the grabbing appendages.

Finally, Jonathan appeared on the veranda, carrying the small figure of Thirteen. The Flayer paused and pulled away from the house.

Another skin-crawling scream was torn from the beast; everyone covered their ears. The Flayer sent its tentacles down and one by one, picked up and tossed Mike, Joyce, Nancy and Hopper across the yard and into the trees. Jonathan watched in horror as they landed out of

sight in the undergrowth. The Flayer reached down again with its spindly arm and gently relieved Jonathan of his hold on Thirteen. Another of its tentacles wound its way around Eleven's torso and lifted her from the ground. She fought against it with both body and mind, but was unable to shift its grip on her. Jonathan backed up, unsure of what to do next. He could hear Eleven screaming. The Mind Flayer lovingly tucked the girls into its sides and turned to leave.

Jonathan watched helplessly as it began its retreat. From behind him, shots were fired, but Nancy's beanbags simply bounced off of the juggernaut leaving it unaffected. The Flayer's giant leg span carried it quickly away, but it did not get far before a cry was heard. "Let's show this bitch how we do things downtown!"

Through the trees, Nancy and Jonathan watched as a yellow stream of liquid flew upwards towards the Flayer and begin covering it with great piles of steaming foam. The beast cried out in pain, but Dustin continued his barrage of caustic chemicals. They could hear Will, Lucas and Max cheering him on.

Joyce, Mike and Hopper all appeared from the trees, they immediately saw the monster thrashing and swaying as it screamed. "Stop! You're hurting her!" Thirteen screeched from her place at its side.

"Don't stop!" Eleven countered. She again struggled to get free and when she had wrenched herself loose from the Flayer's grip, fell to the ground with a thud.

Thirteen continued to scream. Eleven saw that she had been hit with the foam and was crying in agony. "Stop! Stop!" she pleaded.

Eleven looked to her right and saw Will, Lucas, Dustin and Max. The Gorgon Buster was empty and Dustin was shaking the nozzle, trying to get a few more drops from it. She looked to her left and saw Hopper, Mike, Joyce, Jonathan and Nancy. Joyce was supporting Hopper as he was barely able to stand. She concentrated on a large oak straight ahead of her. She extended both arms and set her jaw tight. Amongst the wailing of the injured, the tree trunk split open with a mighty tear and fell away. A pinkish-red glow gleamed from

the other side, the sun was rising. She extended her left hand and, using all the power and energy she possessed, hurtled Hopper's group through the gate. She then extended her right arm and lifted Will and company into the air and through the gate.

She paused, the red light on the other side of the gate was growing brighter and golden as the morning sun ascended. She looked up into the dark sky of the Upside Down at Thirteen and her Cthaeghya, both still wailing in pain. She watched as Cthaeghya shrunk itself to roughly the size of a cat, leaving most of the foam behind. It climbed into Thirteen's arms as she sobbed.

Without remorse, Eleven stepped through the gate and closed it behind her.

Part 07

Robyn's little Honda Civic was as full as it could get with clothes, bedding and records. The sun hadn't quite gone down when Steve locked the keys inside his BMW parked in front of Robyn's house. "My parents have the extra set of keys. It's theirs anyway." He looked at it lovingly, then turned to face his best friend. Robyn looked hesitant, and a bit sad.

"You haven't changed your mind, have you?" he asked.

"No, it's not that," she began. "I just never thought that my parents would react this way. I mean, I knew they would react, but not this badly. Not so that they wouldn't love me anymore."

A tear ran down her cheek, but Steve brushed it away. "They still love you," he consoled. "They just have a lot of pride. Trust me, I know all about pride. I know you can grow out of it."

"I hope one day they can," she said.

"Me too. Let's get out of here."

"Yeah," she agreed and opened the driver's side door. "Massachusetts, here we come!" she called and they drove off into the sunset.

Part 08

"I don't want to go to the hospital," said Hopper to Joyce. She was trying to convince him to get in her car. "I just need food and rest." She shook her head at him and wandered away from the veranda into the yard.

El sat next to him with her arms circled around him. He held her close and she wept quietly. "I was terrified that I was never going to see you again," he said and kissed her forehead. "What's this?" he gestured to her ear. It was red and raw and starting to blister from her ear down her neck.

She lifted her hand to keep him away from it. "I got hit with the foam from Dustin's Gorgon Buster. It's ok, it was just a little bit."

"It looks really bad, you should bandage it up," he was deeply concerned for his daughter.

"I will in a while. I just want to sit with you right now."

He didn't argue. Everyone but Joyce had gone into the house to give them privacy.

El needed to tell him something, but didn't know how. "It's not dead," she started. "Neither is she."

"I know," he said. "But that's a battle for another day."

He sounded tired, but as much as she wanted to stay there in his arms, she knew Joyce wanted time with him. El kissed him on the cheek and disappeared quietly into the house.

Joyce approached him where he sat on the steps to the veranda, draped with the blanket El had brought him. The birds were chirping all around and the sun peeked out between intermittent clouds. Joyce looked into his tired eyes. "Ok, you don't have to go to the hospital. I don't care if I never go back there anyway." She sat down next to him and slipped her arm around his bony one. She gently rested her head on his shoulder.

"Did you mean what you said?" she asked.

"I did," he answered. "I could hear you perfectly, you were too darn

loud."

She moved to smack him, but thought better of it and just laughed. "Yes, Joyce, I meant it." He looked into her beautiful, brown eyes. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"And I want to spend the rest of my life with you," she answered. He reached up from under the blanket and put her face in his hand. Then he kissed her like he had always wanted to.

Part 09

El swung her backpack over her shoulder and looked up. Mike was in the doorway to her bedroom. He had left her alone at her request so she could bandage up the chemical burn she had received in the fray, but he couldn't stay away from her any longer.

"What are you doing?" he asked, noting her jacket, backpack and the note she was placing on the dresser.

"I have to go," she said.

"Go where? This is your home. Plus, you should be coming back to Hawkins now that the Flayer is gone."

"Don't you understand? The Flayer isn't gone. Thirteen isn't gone and she will never leave me alone. The danger will follow me wherever I go - nobody is safe with me around."

"So you're running away?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm coming with you."

"Mike, you will never be safe. I will never be safe."

"Then we'll have to keep each other safe as best we can. I'm not letting you go without me."

El contemplated this momentarily. Leaving Hopper and Joyce was the hardest thing she had ever had to do. She really did want Mike to

be with her, as a comfort to her. But they would be in constant danger.

"Ok, I think everyone is asleep. Get your stuff and meet me out front in half an hour. Don't make any noise when you leave."

"I won't," he said and kissed her on the cheek, then left for the third floor where he and the other boys were staying.

Part 10

"Police Academy?" Jonathan asked, confused.

"Yeah, it sounds worse than it is. I'll only be gone for two semesters at first," Nancy explained. They laid on Jonathan's bed, staring at the stained ceiling.

"And when you come back, you'll be a cop?"

"No, then I'll have one more year and then I'll be a cop," she smiled.

"Well you are pretty handy with a gun. And you're smarter than pretty much every one I know. And you've always liked trying to solve mysteries, Nancy Drew," he teased.

"Hey, that'll be Officer Nancy Drew to you!"

"Just don't fall in love with some muscly cop with rocks for brains, okay?"

"I won't," she assured. "The meathead type was never my thing." She snuggled up to him on the bed and closed her eyes to sleep.

"Then I'll try not to worry," Jonathan said, but he was worried - very worried.

Part 11

The house was still when Mike crept quietly out the back door and around to the front of the house. He was earlier than El had asked him to be, it hadn't taken very long for him to get his things together and steal some food from the kitchen.

He leaned against the station wagon and waited for her. He checked his watch, it had been only 25 minutes. He waited five more minutes. El still had not appeared from the house. He went back in and tiptoed up the stairs to her room. She wasn't there. The note she had written was folded on the dresser.

He then realized what had happened. She was gone. She had a half-hour head start on him, and without a bike or a car, he couldn't catch up. He contemplated if he should wake up Nancy or Joyce to go after her. Instead, he read her note, addressed to Joyce and Jim, and he knew she had done the right thing. She explained the same things in the note that she had said to him. "The danger will follow me wherever I go - nobody is safe with me around." The last thing she had written was, "I promise I will come home soon."

He refolded the note, put it back on the dresser, and joined the others in their Thanksgiving Day slumber.